Confessional Rigidity In Roman Catholicism and Protestantism:

A Theological-Psychological Analysis of Extremes, Trauma, and Spiritual Maturity

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Abstract

In this study I offer an interdisciplinary examination of the theological, anthropological, psychological, and sociological forces that contribute to rigid expressions of Roman Catholic and Protestant identity. Substantive doctrinal, theological, and ecclesial disagreements are real and do indeed persist. However, the persistence and intensity of confessional differences (and resentments) are more accurately attributed to *underlying psychological* needs for certainty, belonging, and identity preservation. This winds up becoming activated and elevated under conditions of perceived threat. To interpret these dynamics, I seek to employ the TAPS framework (Theological, Anthropological, Psychological, and Sociological analysis) as an integrated methodological structure. Rather than employing a single disciplinary lens, TAPS provides a multidimensional analytic matrix capable of capturing the broader complexity of religious identity as a lived, embodied, and historically conditioned phenomenon. Each dimension contributes a distinct mode of inquiry. The same framework also operates holistically and enables the research to trace how doctrinal commitments, cultural practices, psychological dynamics, and social structures interact to produce patterns of confessional behavior. Drawing on typological analysis, trauma theory (including the ARC model of Attachment, Regulation, and Competency) and models of spiritual maturation, I will argue that confessional rigidity is sustained not *only* or *primarily* about theological content, but also by fear, insecurity, and unresolved historical and communal trauma. Developed specifically for this paper, the research uses analytical constructs such as the R.I.G.I.D. and S.A.F.E. schemas, together with developmental trajectories like Fear → Fixation → Ferocity. These constructs and schemas will help to further illuminate how trauma constricts relational, cognitive, and affective flexibility and shapes defensive theological styles and boundary-fortifying behaviors. Patristic insights into disordered desire and misdirected attachment help to further reveal how trauma distorts ecclesial identity and doctrinal imagination. Through a theological-psychological synthesis, the study contends that spiritual maturity, often characterized by humility, secure attachment to God, interpretive charity, and disciplined discernment, provides a constructive and forward pathway. In short, it paves the way for transforming confessional rigidity into a posture capable of sustaining ecumenical engagement and fostering a more integrated, healing-oriented vision of Christian communion.

Introduction

Conflicts between Roman Catholics and orthodox Protestants have long been framed as theological disputes concerning a number of topics such as authority, sacramentality, ecclesiology, and interpretive method to name a few. However, let us consider that the emotional intensity, defensiveness, and rigidity that frequently accompany these disagreements reveal that the animating forces are rarely just theological. Both the presence and persistence of confessional hostility (even in contexts where doctrinal literacy may be minimal) suggests that deeper psychological and sociocultural factors are at work beneath the surface of formal dogmatic claims.[1] As several scholars have noted, religious identity is never just a set of propositions alone, but rather a complex interplay of belief, belonging, and behavior (i.e., embodied practice) that shapes the self at multiple levels of consciousness.[2]

This study argues that confessional antagonism between Catholics and Protestants emerges from a predictable psychological and sociological pattern that I summarize by the triad Fear → Fixation → Ferocity. Fear arises from perceived threats to identity, continuity, or doctrinal purity. This leads to fixation which manifests itself in the elevation of boundary markers as proxies or alternatives for safety. And, finally, ferocity emerges as a defensive posture toward the opposing tradition.[3] Therefore, we must consider that these dynamics follow recognizable trajectories that can be mapped through an interdisciplinary analysis.

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[1] When I talk about "doctrinal literacy", I am referring to individuals who may hold strong, defensive, or even aggressive confessional identities despite having only a limited understanding of the theological claims they are defending. This pattern would seem to indicate that the driving forces behind rigidity cannot be explained primarily by doctrinal content or theological reasoning alone. The intensity of confessional attachment arises from deeper psychological and social dynamics such as the need for belonging, stability, and identity protection that operate independently of formal theological knowledge.

[2] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 513.

[3] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 67.

To further illuminate these trajectories, I employ a TAPS methodology (theological, anthropological, psychological, and sociological) which allows for a multidimensional account of confessional rigidity. In a theological context traditions construct meaning through things like doctrines, liturgies, and authoritative narratives that shape the believer's understanding of God, self, and community.[4] From an anthropological view, religious identity is embedded in a combination of ritual, symbol, and communal memory, which in turn forms a cultural environment that sustains belonging.[5] Psychology tells us that individuals navigate anxiety, trauma[6], and identity formation through cognitive and emotional mechanisms that often manifest in rigidity, projection, and group-threat responses.[7]/[8] Finally, in the arena of sociology confessional groups

[4] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 45.

[5] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 121. Religious identity, as Douglas argues, is not primarily a matter of intellectual assent but an embodied, socially patterned way of inhabiting the world. Within this identity, ritual, symbol, and communal memory interlock to form a cultural environment that sustains belonging. Ritual functions as the architecture of identity, inscribing the community's symbolic order onto the bodies of its members. It does this through repeated practices that stabilize perception, reduce ambiguity, and embed individuals within a shared moral and cosmological framework. Symbols operate as the grammar of meaning, condensing communal values into tangible forms (e.g., water, bread, wine, Scripture, vestments, etc.) that shape emotional responses and interpretive habits at both conscious and unconscious levels. These symbols derive their power from communal memory, the curated narrative of origins, traumas, victories, and sacred history that binds individuals into a lineage and provides continuity across generations. When these three converge (ritual, symbol, and memory) they create a cultural environment that orients the believer, regulates boundaries, and generates a durable sense of belonging. This ecological framework also explains why confessional identity is so deeply felt and why challenges to it evoke strong psychological reactions, i.e., threats to the symbolic order are experienced as threats to the self, prompting communities to tighten boundaries, amplify ritual precision, or idealize their historical narratives. In Douglas's terms, religious identity is not simply believed but lived, embodied, and defended because it constitutes the very habitat in which *the self finds coherence and safety*.

[6] In this paper, trauma is understood as an event or series of events that overwhelms an individual's or community's capacity to cope, regulate emotion, and integrate experience. This results in lasting disruptions to attachment, affect regulation, cognition, and relational trust. However, trauma is not defined by the *external* event alone but by its psychophysiological impact, specifically the way it dysregulates the nervous system, constricts cognitive and emotional flexibility, and generates survival-oriented patterns such as hypervigilance, avoidance, rigidity, or aggression. See Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014), 21-24.

[7] Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012), 89.

[8] When a person's sense of self or belonging feels unstable, the mind often defaults to rigidity. This is a narrowing of thought and behavior that reduces ambiguity and creates the illusion of control. Trauma intensifies this narrowing by activating survival-oriented neural pathways. In turn, this makes flexible engagement or nuanced interpretation feel unsafe. In this state, individuals are more prone to projection, that is, attributing their own fears, conflicts, or vulnerabilities to an external group in order to preserve internal coherence. These dynamics frequently culminate in group-threat responses. Therefore, the presence of a different theological or confessional community is experienced not as a dialogue partner but as a danger to identity, purity, or continuity. Together, these mechanisms reveal that confessional rigidity is often less about doctrinal conviction and more about the psyche's attempt to manage fear, maintain stability, and protect a fragile or threatened sense of self.

function as social bodies that regulate boundaries, reinforce norms, and transmit collective memory across generations.[9]/[10]

Within this interdisciplinary frame, confessional rigidity can be understood as a form of identity fortressing. In other words, a defensive strategy that emerges when individuals or communities experience perceived threats to their stability or coherence. Therefore, I present the thematic acronyms R.I.G.I.D. (Reactivity, Identity fusion, Group threat, Insecurity, Defensiveness) and S.A.F.E. (Stability, Answers, Familiarity, Expectation control) that will serve as analytical tools for identifying the psychological needs that underlie these defensive postures.[11] These frameworks (created specifically for this paper) help to clarify why believers often retreat into theological absolutism[12] or polemical aggression when confronted with differences. Therefore, the issue that we must pause and consider is much more than just a doctrinal disagreement but rather the preservation of a fragile or threatened identity (in both individuals and groups).

Therefore, the proposed TAPS methodology demonstrates that confessional hostility is sustained by a convergence of several key factors: theological claims that become proxies or representations for existential security,[13] anthropological patterns of ritual belonging, psychological responses to fear and trauma, and sociological mechanisms of group boundary

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[9] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 59.

[10] These communities cultivate a sense of belonging by establishing clear markers of identity and difference. This is often codified in liturgy, doctrine, and tradition. Over time, these mechanisms create durable patterns of socialization that shape how members perceive outsiders, interpret conflict, and respond to perceived threats. As a consequence confessional identity becomes embedded not only in individual belief but also in the group's ongoing processes of boundary maintenance, norm enforcement, and the preservation of historical memory.

[11] Donald Capps, *The Depleted Self: Sin in a Narcissistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 102.

[12] Theological absolutism, in its dysfunctional form, refers to a rigid and defensive posture. This posture treats theological claims as inflexible and totalizing not primarily because of their intrinsic truth, but rather because they serve psychological functions such as reducing anxiety, protecting identity, and maintaining group boundaries. It is in this mode, that doctrine becomes a mechanism for certainty and control, and disagreement is experienced as a threat rather than an invitation to discernment. This stands in contrast to ethical absolutism which is a normative philosophical position asserting that certain moral principles are universally valid and binding across contexts. Ethical absolutism concerns the nature of moral truth, whereas dysfunctional theological absolutism concerns the *use* of theological claims as psychological and social defenses.

[13] Existentialism refers to the philosophical exploration of human meaning, freedom, and responsibility, emphasizing the individual's confrontation with uncertainty, finitude, and the task of constructing a coherent life in a world without guaranteed foundations. Existential security, by contrast, is a psychological and sociological condition marked by a felt sense of stability, coherence, and safety in one's identity and place in the world. Whereas existentialism describes the universal human struggle to make meaning, existential security describes the degree of internal and external grounding that allows a person to engage that struggle without collapsing into fear, rigidity, or defensive postures. In the current research this distinction is crucial in noting that low existential security often drives individuals or communities to cling to rigid confessional identities as a substitute for psychological stability, while existentialism simply names the broader human condition in which such responses arise.

maintenance. When these forces align, the result is a confessional posture marked by rigidity, suspicion, and antagonism. However, when these forces are transformed through spiritual maturity (e.g., characterized by humility, curiosity, and grounded identity) people become capable of engaging difference without perceiving it as a threat.

This introduction sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how confessional identity becomes rigid, how trauma intensifies defensive postures, and how spiritual maturity offers a path toward healing and ecumenical openness. In the following sections we will examine typological patterns within Catholic and Protestant psychology, the role of collective and individual trauma in shaping confessional behavior, and the theological-psychological synthesis necessary for moving beyond polemic, impassioned fortresses and toward a more integrated, healthy, and charitable engagement.

Author's Note on Methodology and Originality

This study reflects an original interdisciplinary analysis developed through my own research and writing. The T.A.P.S. framework, the R.I.G.I.D., and S.A.F.E. schemas, and the Fear → Fixation → Ferocity, and G.R.A.C.E. trajectories, as well as additional triads were created specifically for this project and emerge from my independent engagement with theological, anthropological, psychological, and sociological sources. I contend that this interdisciplinary framework is necessary for the following reasons: confessional rigidity cannot be adequately explained through a single disciplinary lens which is why this study integrates theology, anthropology, psychology, and sociology as a unified analytic framework (TAPS). Theology is necessary because confessional identity is rooted in claims about God, revelation, and ecclesial authority, and these doctrinal commitments shape the explicit content of Catholic and Protestant self-understanding. Anthropology contributes by showing that religious identity is more than something that is believed for it is embodied through ritual, symbol, and communal memory, all of which form the cultural environment in which belonging and meaning are lived. Psychology is essential for illuminating the internal mechanisms such as fear, attachment, trauma, projection, and identity protection, that determine how individuals hold their beliefs and why difference is often experienced as *danger* rather than *dialogue*. Sociology complements these insights by examining how groups maintain boundaries, transmit collective memory, reinforce norms, and generate the social conditions in which confessional antagonism or openness becomes possible. Together, these

four disciplines reveal that confessional rigidity is simultaneously a theological *posture*, an anthropological *pattern*, a psychological *protection*, and a sociological *phenomenon*. It is only by integrating all four can we fully understand how doctrinal claims become fused with deeper needs for *permanence* (stability), *place* (belonging), and *preservation* (identity).

Throughout this study I also intentionally employ alliteration formulations as a way of creating concise and memorable patterns. My intent is for these structures to serve both a pedagogical and analytical purpose. For example, they highlight the internal coherence of confessional postures, create rhetorical symmetry across disciplines, and help readers trace developmental trajectories with greater clarity. Finally, all argumentation, synthesis, and prose were produced through a traditional human drafting and revision process, and the interpretations offered here represent my own scholarly contribution informed by years of study in theology, ethics, and the philosophy of religion.

Part I - Typology of Confessional Psychology

1. Introduction to Confessional Psychology

The Difference Between Doctrinal Disagreement and Psychological Posture

Doctrinal disagreement in this paper refers to substantive differences in theological content, such as divergent claims about authority, sacramentality, or ecclesial structure. These disagreements operate at the level of propositions, interpretations, and formal reasoning and can be engaged through study, dialogue, and hermeneutical analysis. By contrast, a psychological posture refers to the internal stance, i.e., emotional, cognitive, and relational through which a person *holds* their doctrinal commitments. This psychological posture shapes whether disagreement is approached with curiosity or fear, humility or defensiveness, openness or rigidity. As scholars of religion note, confessional conflict often escalates not because of the doctrines themselves but because of the identity-protective functions those doctrines serve when individuals feel threatened or insecure.[14] Hence, when theological claims become fused with the preservation of belonging, stability, or self-worth, disagreement is no longer experienced as just another intellectual difference but instead as a psychological danger that in turn activates defensive patterns such as projection, group-threat responses, or boundary fortressing.[15] To briefly summarize: doctrinal disagreement concerns *what* is believed, while psychological posture concerns *how* and *why* those beliefs are held and it is the latter that most often determines whether disagreement becomes *considerate communication* or *harsh hostility.*[16]

Why Psychological Analysis is Necessary for Understanding Catholic-Protestant Conflict

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[14] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 89.
[15] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 21-24.
[16] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67.

While Catholic-Protestant disagreements are often framed as disputes over doctrine, authority, or ecclesial structure, the persistence and emotional intensity of these conflicts cannot be explained by theological content alone. Psychological analysis is necessary because confessional hostility frequently arises from identity-protective mechanisms (e.g., fear, insecurity, group-threat responses, etc.). In turn, these identify-protective mechanisms further shape how individuals *hold* their beliefs.[17] Research in moral psychology shows that when religious identity becomes fused with personal or communal survival, disagreement is experienced. This disagreement is more than an intellectual challenge, it is a threat to belonging and self-coherence, triggering defensive rigidity.[18] Trauma theory further demonstrates that unresolved historical wounds, collective memory, and dysregulated attachment patterns can constrict cognitive and emotional flexibility, making openness to difference feel unsafe and threatening.[19] Without attending to these psychological dynamics, theological dialogue risks overlooking the root source of conflict and thus mistaking emotional reactivity for doctrinal conviction. Hence, psychological analysis is indispensable for understanding why confessional differences so often escalate into antagonism and why healing requires far more than just theological clarity; it also requires the careful cultivation of secure identity, emotional regulation, and relational trust.[20]

Part I begins by outlining the deep psychological orientations that shape Catholic and Protestant identity long before trauma distorts them. Each tradition carries a characteristic way of imagining authority, belonging, truth, and the self. In effect, these patterns that can foster genuine spiritual vitality or, under pressure, harden into defensive extremes. To ground the analysis that follows, it is helpful to begin with a concise typology of these baseline dispositions. The table below offers an at-a-glance picture of the core orientations, healthy expressions, and potential distortions that define each tradition's psychological posture.

[17] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 89.
[18] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 67.
[19] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 21-24.
[20] Capps, *The Depleted Self*, 102.

Table 1. Catholic vs. Protestant Psychological Dispositions

Dimension	Catholic Disposition	Protestant Disposition
Core Orientation	Communal, sacramental, hierarchical	Individual, textual, conscience-driven
Healthy Expression	Unity, continuity, sacramental imagination	Authenticity, responsibility, Scripture
Distorted Expression	Authoritarianism, legalism, institutional pride	Hyper-individualism, rigidity, anti-institutionalism
Underlying Need	Safety, stability, belonging	Autonomy, integrity, purity
Distorted Triad	*Control → Certainty → Closure*	*Autonomy → Anarchy → Alienation*

2. Catholic Psychological Dispositions

Catholic spirituality is primarily shaped by a sacramental worldview. In this worldview, divine grace is mediated through material signs, communal structures, and historical continuity. Therefore, Catholic spirituality may be described as a sacramental way of life grounded in the conviction that God communicates and sanctifies through visible, tangible, and communal means. For example, it assumes that divine grace is mediated through material signs such as baptismal water, Eucharistic bread and wine, anointing oil, sacred spaces, and embodied gestures. In addition, it can also be mediated through communal structures such as the liturgy, the hierarchical priesthood, parish life, and the communion of saints, through historical continuity expressed in the liturgical calendar, apostolic succession, ancient prayers and creeds, and the enduring witness of monastic and devotional traditions. Together, these elements form a spirituality that is not primarily interior or private but incarnational,[21] ecclesial, and rooted in the Church's living tradition. It is here where the material world, the visible community, and the memory of faith serve as ordinary channels of divine presence and transformation. This orientation forms not only a theological system but a psychological posture in that Catholics tend to experience faith as something received, inherited, and embodied within a visible ecclesial body.[22] The anthropological depth of ritual,

[21] In this context, the claim that Catholic spirituality is "not primarily interior or private but incarnational" does not negate interiority; rather, it repositions interior devotion within the broader ecclesial, sacramental, and communal structures through which grace is ordinarily mediated. Considering that because the Incarnation reveals that God works through flesh, matter, and history, Catholic spirituality assumes that grace is ordinarily mediated through visible realities (e.g., sacraments, rituals, sacred spaces, communal worship, and the continuity of tradition). Thus, spirituality is lived not as a private inward journey detached from the world, but as participation in an embodied, ecclesial, and material way of life through which divine presence becomes tangible and transformative.

[22] Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 12. This matters because it explains why Catholic spirituality tends to produce a psychological posture of rootedness, continuity, and communal embeddedness. The believer does not stand alone before God but is enfolded within a visible Church, a sacramental system, and a historical narrative that precedes them. Greeley argues that this creates a distinctive sense of security, identity, and relationality. Catholics feel themselves part of a larger, living organism (i.e., the Church) whose rituals, symbols, and communal memory shape their imagination long before they can articulate doctrinal propositions. In other words the Catholic imagination forms people not only in what they *think* but in how

symbol, and tradition creates a stable environment in which identity is formed across generations. Psychologically, this fosters a sense of containment and belonging while sociologically it reinforces communal cohesion and institutional durability.[23]

2.1. Healthy Expressions

Unity and Harmony

In its healthiest form, Catholic unity is more than uniformity it is also a dynamic harmony that integrates diverse cultures, spiritualities, and theological emphases within a single ecclesial communion. For example, consider that the Roman Rite, the Byzantine Rite, the Maronite Rite, and the Syro-Malabar Rite all coexist within the same Church while expressing the same apostolic faith through distinct liturgical languages, ritual gestures, musical traditions, etc. Notice that this plurality is not a threat to unity but rather it is a manifestation of it (i.e., unity expressed as communion rather than sameness).[24] This theologically reflects the Church's self-understanding as the Body of Christ, where difference is not a threat but a gift[25] and anthropologically unity provides a shared symbolic world that anchors identity. Security is rooted psychologically in belonging to something larger than oneself, that is, a participation in a transcendent communal reality, an encounter with an Other (divine, historical, and ecclesial) that stabilizes the self through relationship rather than isolation. Sociologically it is both unity and harmony enables the Church to function as a transnational institution that is capable of sustaining a global solidarity.[26]

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they *perceive*, *feel*, and *belong*. This is why Greeley insists that Catholic spirituality is as much a psychological posture as a theological system for it molds the inner life through the outer, embodied life of the Church.

[23] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 513.

[24] More specifically this can be seen in the inculturation of worship, such as the integration of Ganda drumming in Ugandan liturgies or indigenous dance in Mexican Marian feasts; in the flourishing of multiple spiritual traditions within the Latin Church, from Benedictine stability to Carmelite contemplation, Ignatian discernment, and Franciscan poverty; in the presence of legitimate theological plurality, including Thomistic, Augustinian, Ressourcement ("returning to the sources"), and Liberationist schools operating under the same magisterial framework; in the maintenance of distinct canonical systems among Eastern Catholic Churches; in the early Church's own regional diversity of fasting practices, baptismal formulas, and Eucharistic prayers; in the global proliferation of culturally specific Marian devotions such as Our Lady of Guadalupe, Czestochowa, Kibeho, and Aparecida; and in the varied structures of parish life across continents, from small Christian communities in parts of Africa and Latin America to large territorial parishes in Europe and North America. Together, these examples illustrate that Catholic unity is capacious, integrative, and rooted in communion rather than uniformity, embodying a secure and mature ecclesial identity capable of embracing difference without fragmentation.

[25] Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books, 2002), 45.

[26] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 59.

Comfort With Mystery

One must also consider that fact that Catholic spirituality embraces paradox, sacrament, and the limits of human comprehension by holding together truths that exceed linear rationality (e.g., Christ being fully God and fully human, the Church being both holy and sinful, grace being both unmerited and transformative, Scripture being both divinely inspired and mediated through human authors, etc.). This paradoxical imagination is further sustained in a sacramental way in that material elements (e.g., water, oil, bread, wine, touch, gesture, etc. as has been previously noted) become conduits of divine presence, revealing a world in which the visible and invisible permeate without collapsing into either pure symbolism or crude literalism. Thus, this sacramentality presupposes that divine action is not exhausted by human explanation, and invites believers into a position of "reverent unknowing" in which mystery is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be inhabited. This comfort with mystery reflects a theological conviction that God transcends rational mastery.[27] Psychologically viewed, it cultivates humility and openness to ambiguity because these traits signal a secure, resilient, and well-integrated self, that is, one that does not need to collapse complexity into rigid categories in order to feel safe.[28] Viewed anthropologically, it is expressed through ritual actions that communicate meaning beyond words, and sociologically, it allows the Church to maintain cohesion despite internal diversity, because not all tensions require immediate resolution.[29] For example, large, long-standing institutions develop conflict-absorbing structures (e.g., shared sacraments, common creeds, hierarchical mediation, deep historical memory, etc.) that enable them to hold disagreement without fracturing. In Catholicism specifically, unity is grounded not in uniformity of opinion but in participation in a common sacramental and institutional life which in turn creates enough stability for differences to coexist while discernment unfolds over time. This capacity to "hold" tension without forcing

[27] Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 33.

[28] Humility allows the individual to acknowledge the limits of their understanding without experiencing that limitation as a threat to identity, while openness to ambiguity trains the mind to remain flexible, curious, and receptive in the face of mystery. This is healthy because it prevents the collapse into black-and-white thinking that often accompanies anxiety or trauma. It also reduces the need for control-based certainty, and it enables the believer to engage theological difference without perceiving it as destabilizing. In developmental terms, the capacity to hold tension (i.e., to live with "both/and" rather than "either/or") is a marker of psychological maturity, indicating that the self is grounded enough to encounter the unknown without fear. Within Catholic spirituality, this position aligns with the sacramental and paradoxical nature of the tradition, forming believers who can inhabit mystery rather than defend against it, and who can approach God, others, and themselves with greater patience, nuance, and interpretive charity.

[29] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 121.

premature closure is a hallmark of resilient communities and other social bodies and a key reason the Church can sustain diversity without losing coherence.

Historical Rootedness

Catholic identity is deeply shaped by a sense of historical continuity stretching back to, and rooted in, the apostles which in turn provides a narrative of stability and legitimacy. This theologically affirms the Church as a living tradition guided by the Holy Spirit.[30] This emphasizes that the Church's identity is not fixed simply in the past but is continually renewed through the Spirit's ongoing work in history. Tradition is understood as a dynamic process in which the apostolic faith is received, interpreted, and embodied anew in each generation, allowing genuine development without devolving into division. One must understand that this view grounds unity not in static uniformity but in the Spirit who preserves continuity while enabling growth and ensuring that the Church can adapt to new contexts while remaining rooted in the same foundational truth. From the viewpoint of anthropology, it embeds believers within a lineage of saints, councils, and liturgies, and psychologically it offers a secure foundation that mitigates existential anxiety for when a person is embedded in a tradition that precedes them, accompanies them, and will outlast them, the self is relieved of the burden of generating meaning in isolation. This reduces the anxiety that arises from uncertainty, temporariness, and the pressure to construct identity entirely from within. From this perspective, Catholic identity becomes a psychological shelter not by trying to eliminate mystery or difficulty, but rather by situating the individual within a larger story in which their life is held, interpreted, and sustained. One must at least consider sociologically how historical rootedness reinforces institutional authority by linking its present structures to ancient origins,[31] such as grounding the episcopacy in the apostolic succession, rooting the papacy in the Petrine ministry, deriving liturgical forms from early Christian worship, and tracing doctrinal formulations to the councils of the first centuries. These historical continuities function as legitimating narratives that frame contemporary authority not as an invention of the present but as the organic extension of practices, offices, and beliefs that have shaped the Church from its earliest generations.

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[30] Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 18.
[31] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 3.

Institutional Stability

The Catholic Church's hierarchical structure provides organizational coherence and long-term resilience because it establishes clear lines of authority, stable channels for decision-making, and enduring mechanisms for transmitting doctrine, practice, and communal memory across generations. A hierarchical system enables the Church to coordinate its global life, maintain unity amid cultural diversity, and respond to crises without losing institutional continuity. It also distributes responsibility in a way that allows local communities to adapt pastorally while remaining connected to a broader ecclesial framework. Over time this structure functions as a stabilizing backbone in that it preserves identity, mediates conflict, and ensures that the Church can absorb internal tensions or external pressures without fragmenting. Hierarchy is understood theologically as a sacramental sign of Christ's shepherding presence while anthropologically it offers clear roles and rituals that structure communal life, and this is important because humans rely on predictable patterns to create cohesion and shared meaning. Defined roles reduce ambiguity about responsibility and authority, while rituals synchronize the community around common practices and values. Together, they provide a stable framework that helps individuals know how to belong, how to participate, and how to locate themselves within the group's larger narrative. This also ties into the psychological in that it provides predictability and reduces uncertainty. And sociologically it enables the Church to endure crises, transitions, and cultural shifts without losing its core identity.[32]

2.2. Distorted Expressions

On the other hand, when Catholic personalities and outlooks are instead (or primarily) shaped by fear, trauma, or insecurity, they can harden into the triad of Control → Certainty → Closure as explained below.

Control: Authoritarian Reliance on Hierarchy

Control emerges when authority becomes a mechanism or tool for managing anxiety rather than guiding discernment.[33] Healthy authority operates very differently in that it forms judgment, cultivates interior freedom, and equips the believer to engage complexity without fear. However,

[32] Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 55.
[33] Hans Küng, *The Catholic Church* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 412.

when authority is used defensively, it seeks to eliminate ambiguity, silence questions, and impose uniformity as a way of trying to stabilize a fragile or threatened identity. By contrast, when authority functions as it should, it does not shield the believer from uncertainty, but instead it provides the theological, spiritual, and communal resources needed to navigate uncertainty with maturity. Healthy authority *clarifies* without *constricting*, *coaches* without *controlling*, and *cultivates comprehension* rather than *commanding*. In this manner the contrast between *control* and *clarity* (discernment) reveals two fundamentally different psychological postures. One is rooted in fear and the need for certainty, while the other is grounded in trust, humility, and the confidence that truth can withstand patient, thoughtful engagement. Within a theological framework this control and authoritarian reliance on hierarchy tends to manifests as an *overemphasis* on magisterial pronouncements at the expense of personal conscience. In addition, it anthropologically reduces rich traditions to rigid prescriptions and psychologically it reflects a desire to eliminate ambiguity by outsourcing responsibility to authority figures.[34] Sociologically, it *fosters clericalism*[35] and *forecloses coherent plurality* (i.e., legitimate diversity).[36]

Certainty: Legalistic Dependence on Canon Law

[34] By outsourcing responsibility to authority figures this relieves the individual of the anxiety that comes with making complex judgments on their own. When an external authority provides clear answers, rules, or boundaries, the self is temporarily freed from the discomfort of doubt, the fear of being wrong, and/or the vulnerability of discernment. This creates a sense of safety and predictability in that the world now feels more ordered, choices feel less risky, and the individual can avoid the internal conflict that accompanies moral or theological ambiguity. In doing so deferring to authority becomes a coping strategy (and in this context not necessarily a mature one) that stabilizes an anxious psyche by thus trading freedom and discernment for clarity and reassurance.

[35] I am referring to the term "clericalism" as a distorted form of church leadership or authority in which clergy are elevated above the rest of the community in ways that concentrate power, diminish accountability, and undermine the dignity and agency of the laity. It is not simply "respect for clergy," but a structural and psychological posture in which ordained ministers are treated as inherently superior, spiritually privileged, or exempt from ordinary forms of critique and mutual responsibility.

[36] Richard Sipe, *A Secret World* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1990), 77. Sipe's point is that when hierarchy is used to manage institutional anxiety, magisterial authority becomes overextended and functions as a tool of control rather than guidance. In such a climate, official pronouncements are treated as exhaustive solutions meant to silence uncertainty, while the role of personal conscience is minimized or distrusted. The result is a theological culture where obedience replaces discernment and the living tradition is reduced to defensive declarations rather than Spirit-guided growth.

Certainty[37] becomes distorted when law replaces wisdom. [38] In theological thought, it treats canon law as an infallible shield against error. Canon law is not infallible because it is a human juridical system that *forms*, *flexes*, and sometimes *faces* correction. Infallibility, on the other hand, applies only to definitive teachings on faith and morals and not necessarily to disciplinary norms that change across *centuries* and *civilizations.* Therefore, when canon law is treated as if it were an error-proof safeguard, it is being asked to bear a theological weight it cannot carry and nor was it designed to. Its proper role is instrumental in a way to *steward counsel, shape clerical* practice, and *strengthen communion.* Certainty becomes distorted when law is elevated beyond this role, because legal clarity is mistaken for theological truth and the deeper work of discernment is displaced.[39] Thus, anthropologically it reduces *ritual* to *rubric* in that ritual is no longer understood as a living, meaning-making practice that forms identity and binds a community together, but instead becomes a set of prescribed actions performed primarily to satisfy external requirements.[40] Furthermore, it psychologically reflects a fear of making mistakes or encountering

[37] A clarifying note on "certainty". In this context, *certainty* refers to a psychological and institutional desire for security, predictability, and control (i.e., the kind of certainty achieved by appealing to clear rules, fixed procedures, and authoritative pronouncements). It is less about truth itself and more about the emotional relief that comes from eliminating ambiguity. By contrast, in epistemology, *certainty* names a justified cognitive state (i.e., the firm, rational assurance that a proposition corresponds to reality or is known with indubitable clarity). Epistemic certainty is ordered toward objective truth, whereas juridical-psychological certainty is ordered toward stability. When law replaces wisdom, the Church risks confusing these two by mistaking the comfort of rule-based clarity for the deeper, more demanding certainty that arises from truth, discernment, and the ongoing search for understanding.

[38] Ladislas Orsy, *Receiving the Council* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), 22. Orsy cautions that the Church distorts the very idea of certainty when it allows law to overshadow wisdom. His concern is not with canon law itself but with a mentality that treats legal clarity as if it were the primary guarantor of truth. For Orsy, law is always a secondary, supportive instrument that must remain rooted in theology, discernment, and the living tradition. Thus when it is elevated beyond its proper role, it creates a false sense of security that bypasses the deeper, more demanding work of ecclesial judgment. In this sense, my wording of *"Certainty becomes distorted when law replaces wisdom"* is a type of shorthand to capture Orsy's warning that juridical solutions cannot substitute for the Spirit-guided processes of interpretation, reception, and growth that sustain the Church's authentic pursuit of truth.

[39] Catholic teaching holds that the pope and the magisterium can teach infallibly, but only under very specific conditions and only on matters of faith and morals. However, canon law belongs to the Church's disciplinary and administrative authority, which is authoritative but intentionally reformable. Infallibility protects truths that cannot change (e.g., doctrines about the Trinity, the sacraments, fundamental moral principles, etc.) whereas canon law governs how the Church organizes its life in concrete historical circumstances. Because circumstances shift, the Church must be free to revise fasting regulations, sacramental procedures, penal norms, and pastoral policies. This is why the 1917 Code of Canon Law was completely replaced in 1983, and why numerous canons have been amended since. These revisions do not undermine infallibility, they simply illustrate that the pope exercises different kinds of authority with one that safeguards unchanging doctrine, and another that legislates practical norms for the good of the Church. In short, canon law expresses the Church's prudential judgment (not irreformable truth) and therefore it is authoritative without being infallible.

[40] When this shift occurs, the symbolic depth, communal memory, and embodied participation that give ritual its anthropological power are flattened into technical correctness. Ritual ceases to function as a shared enactment of belief and belonging and instead it becomes a checklist. The end result is that the community's imaginative and

complexity while sociologically, it creates environments where compliance is valued more than discernment or pastoral sensitivity. In other words, it fosters clericalism at the expense of suppressing legitimate diversity (as was noted in the previous section) by concentrating authority in a narrow group and treating their perspectives as the normative center of ecclesial life. Thus it is when hierarchical control becomes overemphasized that the voices, experiences, and theological insights of laypeople, women, and marginalized communities are sidelined. In turn, the alternative expressions of Catholic life are viewed with suspicion rather than as contributions to the whole.[41] This dynamic elevates *conformity* over *communion, curtails contextual change* (i.e., local adaptation), and ultimately weakens the Church's capacity to reflect the full breadth of its *cross-cultural* and *civilizational richness* (i.e., global and historical).

Closure: Resistance to Interpretive Freedom

Closure arises when tradition becomes static rather than living. Viewing this theologically it manifests as suspicion toward *adaptive articulation* (i.e., development or contextualization)[42] because development is perceived as a threat to the purity, stability, or definitiveness of what has already been received. When tradition is imagined as a fixed deposit rather than a dynamic reality guided by the Spirit, any attempt to interpret doctrine in light of new questions, cultures, or historical circumstances appears risky as if adaptation might dilute truth rather than deepen understanding. This in turn produces a defensive posture in which continuity is equated with immobility, and faithfulness is measured by resistance to growth. And, anthropologically it freezes ritual forms in ways that disconnect them from contemporary experience. In other words, freezing ritual forms is dangerous because it severs the living bond between a community's practices and

interpretive engagement with its own practices is diminished and the richness of ritual life is replaced by the narrow concern of "doing it right" rather than "being formed by it."

[41] To further illustrate: lay renewal movements may be treated as destabilizing, women theologians face disproportionate scrutiny, and culturally rooted or indigenous liturgical expressions are curtailed in favor of uniformity. Pastoral ministries accompanying LGBTQ Catholics can be restricted, justice-oriented perspectives dismissed as ideological, and local adaptations overridden by centralized authority. In each case, alternative expressions of Catholic life are viewed with suspicion rather than recognized as legitimate contributions to the Church's richness and breadth.

[42] In this theological context, *contextualization* means interpreting and expressing the Church's teaching in ways that genuinely engage the concrete historical, cultural, and pastoral circumstances in which people live. It assumes that doctrine is stable in substance but always needs to be articulated, applied, and embodied within particular contexts so that its meaning can be received fruitfully. Therefore, when a community becomes suspicious of contextualization, it treats doctrine as if it must remain frozen in the conceptual frameworks, pastoral assumptions, or cultural conditions of an earlier moment (e.g., the early Church, medieval times, pre-Vatican II, etc.). The result is a fear that adapting language, emphasis, or pastoral application might compromise truth, rather than recognizing that such adaptation is often necessary for truth to be understood, lived, and transmitted.

the world in which its members actually live. Rituals only derive their power from being embodied, meaningful, and resonant, and only work when people can bring their own lives, experiences, and cultural background into them (i.e., when people can genuinely see themselves in them). Therefore, when forms become rigid, they stop communicating and they no longer mediate a real, internalized sense of belonging, identity, or shared memory. And, instead of shaping a people, they become artifacts to be preserved rather than practices to be lived. Over time, this disconnect erodes participation, weakens communal cohesion, and turns ritual into performance rather than formation, that is, something done at people rather than with them. This leads into the psychological that reflects a defensive posture that equates any kind of change with danger while sociologically, it leads to factionalism and resistance to reform.[43]

2.3. Underlying Needs (S.A.F.E.)

Catholic extremes often arise from the S.A.F.E. needs:

Stability in Tradition

Stability provides psychological grounding, however, when it is threatened, it can lead to rigid traditionalism that resists even legitimate development.[44]

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[43] John O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 89. O'Malley describes how genuine theological differences at the Council gradually took on the shape of identifiable factions. He notes that bishops and theologians began forming loose alliances, meeting informally, and coordinating interventions on the Council floor. The so-called "Rhine group" of Northern European bishops emerged as a driving force for renewal, while a more conservative minority organized to defend the existing schemas and resist rapid change. The dramatic early vote to reject the Curia-prepared drafts revealed that the assembly was not a uniform body but a community with distinct visions, strategies, and priorities. For O'Malley, these developments were not signs of dysfunction but evidence of a living Church in which open deliberation naturally produces alignments, disagreements, and the creative tension necessary for genuine reform. O'Malley never moralizes the Council or calls its factions "bad," but he is very clear about the sociological risks that emerged when factions hardened. His analysis is subtle in that factions are normal in a large deliberative body, but they become unhealthy when they shift from theological dialogue to social defensiveness.

[44] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 349. MacIntyre notes that a tradition stays rational only if it continues to argue, reinterpret, and develop. When a tradition freezes its past and refuses further debate, it loses coherence because it can no longer explain its own growth or respond to new challenges. When a tradition is treated as fixed and closed (in MacIntyre's sense) it can create a subtle but real psychological threat for individuals in that a closed tradition threatens people because it removes the space needed for growth, questioning, and honest engagement. When development is treated as dangerous, individuals learn that their own experiences, insights, or uncertainties are unwelcome. This produces anxiety in the fear of being wrong, of disrupting the system, or of stepping outside the approved boundaries. It can also generate a sense of stagnation, because people are asked to conform to inherited forms without being allowed to integrate them into their own lives. Over time, this erodes confidence, discourages creativity, and *fosters a defensive mindset in which maintaining the appearance of certainty becomes more important than seeking understanding.*

Answers From Authority

Authority offers clarity, yet when over-relied upon it can become a substitute for personal discernment and spiritual maturity.[45]

Familiarity in Ritual

Ritual familiarity comforts the psyche, yet fear can turn it into a defensive mechanism against cultural or theological diversity.[46]

Expectation Control Through Structure

Finally, structure reduces uncertainty, although when it is absolutized, it in turn becomes a way to avoid vulnerability, ambiguity, or genuine encounter.[47]

2.4. Case Study: The Post-Vatican II Liturgical Tensions as a S.A.F.E. Response

A clear illustration of how Catholic extremes emerge from the S.A.F.E. needs can be seen in the decades following the Second Vatican Council,[48] particularly in communities that

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[45] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 241. Lonergan notes that people often seek safety in authority because authentic understanding requires vulnerability: the willingness to question, to be wrong, and to revise one's horizons. When this risk feels threatening, individuals may retreat into external authority as a psychological shelter, using it to avoid the personal responsibility of judgment. For Lonergan, this is a misuse of authority, a way of seeking protection from the demands of genuine inquiry rather than allowing authority to guide the ongoing, interior work of understanding.

[46] James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 67. Smith argues that humans are shaped most deeply not by ideas we think *but by practices that aim our desires*. On p. 67, he emphasizes that liturgies (whether religious or secular) form us by training our imagination and directing what we love. This means people are not primarily "brains on a stick" but embodied creatures whose habits and rituals mold their identity. When we overlook this, we misunderstand how formation works and underestimate the power of cultural practices to shape our deepest commitments. Ritual becomes an unhealthy defense mechanism when the formative power of practices (the very insight Smith highlights) is used not for growth but for avoidance. Because liturgies shape desire at a deep, pre-cognitive level, people can cling to familiar practices as a way to shield themselves from the discomfort of change, self-examination, or ambiguity. Instead of allowing rituals to open them to transformation, they use them to maintain a sense of control and stability. The practice becomes a psychological refuge (e.g., "If I keep doing this the same way, I don't have to face what feels threatening."). In that mode, liturgy no longer forms the person; it protects them from being formed.

[47] Capps, *The Depleted Self*, 102. What Capps is saying is that structure is psychologically helpful up to a point. It gives people predictability, reduces anxiety, and creates a sense of order, but when structure becomes absolutized (i.e., treated as the only safe way to function), it stops serving growth and instead becomes a shield. It is in that mode that people use rigid structures to protect themselves from anything that feels risky (e.g., emotional vulnerability, relational openness, ambiguity, the unpredictability of real encounter with others, etc.). Therefore, what may begin as a healthy support winds up becoming a defensive mechanism that keeps the self from engaging authentically with the world.

[48] Vatican II met from 1962 to 1965 after being convoked by Pope John XXIII to renew the Catholic Church's life and mission in the rapidly changing modern world. John XXIII described the council's purpose as *aggiornamento* (a pastoral "updating") that would deepen the Church's spiritual vitality, promote Christian unity, and engage

experienced the liturgical reforms as a threat to stability, identity, and continuity. While many Catholics received the reforms as a renewal of worship and ecclesial life, others interpreted them through a psychological lens of loss, disruption, and disorientation. Their reaction was not simply theological disagreement but a patterned response rooted in the S.A.F.E. needs of Stability, Answers, Familiarity, and Expectation-control.

For many Catholics, *Stability in Tradition* had long been anchored in the Tridentine liturgy,[49] which functioned as a symbolic world of continuity, reverence, and predictability. When the liturgical reforms introduced new rites, vernacular languages, and revised rubrics, some communities experienced these changes as an existential rupture rather than a pastoral adaptation. In the context of Vatican II and the broader discussion of liturgical or ecclesial reform, pastoral adaptation refers to the Church's intentional effort to adjust its practices, language, and modes of ministry so that the Gospel can be communicated more effectively within changing cultural, social, and psychological conditions while at the same time not altering the substance of the faith itself. Thus, it is not *creedal change* but *clerical calibration*. As scholars of ritual theory note, when a community's ritual world is disrupted, the psyche often responds with defensive rigidity to preserve coherence.[50] This helps explain why certain groups developed an intensified attachment to pre-conciliar forms not simply out of theological preference but primarily as a psychological strategy to restore stability.[51]

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contemporary culture with clarity and charity. Continued under Pope Paul VI, the council produced 16 major documents that reshaped Catholic life such as reforms of the liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), a renewed vision of the Church as the People of God (*Lumen Gentium*), a fresh articulation of Scripture and Tradition (*Dei Verbum*), and a landmark reflection on the Church's role in the modern world (*Gaudium et Spes*). These texts transformed Catholic worship, expanded ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, affirmed religious freedom, elevated the role of the laity, and set the trajectory for global Catholicism in the decades that followed.

[49] The Tridentine Liturgy, established after the Council of Trent and promulgated in 1570 by Pope Pius V, became the standard form of the Roman Rite for over four centuries, characterized by its use of Latin, a fixed and highly structured ritual, *ad orientem* posture (i.e., "toward the East" referring to the priest and the congregation facing the same direction, traditionally eastward, during the liturgy), and a strong emphasis on the sacrificial nature of the Mass. Rooted in medieval liturgical development and intended to unify worship across the Catholic world, it provided a stable, contemplative, and symbolically rich form of prayer that shaped Catholic spirituality until the reforms of Vatican II introduced a revised liturgy in the vernacular. Today, the Tridentine Mass continues to be celebrated under specific permissions, valued by some for its supposed sense of reverence, continuity, and transcendence.

[50] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 121. Douglas explains that ritual systems function as symbolic maps that hold a community's world together. When those systems are threatened (whether by ambiguity, boundary-crossing, or disruption) the community experiences a kind of cognitive and social destabilization. In response, groups often tighten boundaries, intensify rules, or reassert purity codes to restore order and coherence. In other words, ritual disruption produces anxiety, and that anxiety is managed through heightened rigidity, because the ritual system is what makes the world intelligible and safe.

[51] Throughout this paper, the term "conciliar" refers to the theological and pastoral outlook shaped by an ecumenical council (most often Vatican II) emphasizing renewal, dialogue, collegiality, and engagement with the

Similarly, the S.A.F.E. need for *Answers From Authority* became distorted in two opposite directions. First, some Catholics responded by doubling down on magisterial authority, insisting that every post-conciliar directive must be obeyed *without question*. Others, on the other hand, feeling that authority itself had become unstable, sought alternative sources of certainty in fringe movements, private revelations, or charismatic leaders who promised *unambiguous answers*.[52] Sociologists of religion have observed that periods of institutional transition often produce both hyper-obedience and hyper-suspicion, each one functioning as a compensatory mechanism for anxiety.[53]

The need for *Familiarity in Ritual* also played a central role in that rituals are not just symbolic actions, but they are rather embodied patterns that regulate emotional life,[54] For when familiar gestures, sounds, and rhythms were altered, some Catholics experienced a loss of a ritual "home." In response to this, certain communities developed a type of defensive ritualism as evidenced by an insistence on precise rubrical execution, rigid policing of posture, or idealization of a past liturgical moment.[55] Therefore, what began as a desire for reverence became (in some cases) a mechanism for resisting cultural or theological diversity.

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modern world. "Pre-conciliar" designates the earlier era marked by more centralized authority, uniform liturgical forms, and a defensive posture toward cultural change. The terms function not only as chronological markers but as shorthand for two distinct ecclesial instincts. The former is oriented toward preservation and stability and the latter toward renewal and pastoral adaptation.

[52] More specifically, some Catholics responded to the post-conciliar period by anchoring themselves even more tightly to official Church authority, treating every new directive from Rome, whether a liturgical rubric, a catechetical clarification, or a papal instruction, as something to be followed with exacting precision. In some dioceses, this took the form of "magisterial maximalism," where the General Instruction of the Roman Missal was treated almost as an infallible code and where even minor variations in posture or ritual were viewed as threats to unity. Others moved in the opposite direction, concluding that institutional authority had become unstable or internally conflicted. Feeling unmoored, they gravitated toward alternative sources of certainty: unapproved apparition movements such as Garabandal or Bayside, apocalyptic prophecy networks predicting imminent chastisement, or charismatic visionaries who claimed privileged insight into the "true" state of the Church. Still others sought refuge in traditionalist enclaves like independent chapels or groups questioning the legitimacy of post-conciliar reforms. Though these responses diverged sharply in expression (i.e., one clinging to official authority, the other bypassing it entirely) both reveal the same underlying dynamic: when communal identity feels threatened, the search for stability often manifests either as hyper-obedience to institutional structures or as a retreat into parallel systems of authority that promise clarity in a time of uncertainty.

[53] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 59. As Berger and Luckmann argue, when the taken-for-granted stability of an institution is disrupted, individuals experience a loss of social coherence that generates anxiety; in response, some compensate through intensified obedience while others compensate through heightened suspicion, both functioning as attempts to restore a sense of order.

[54] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 82.

[55] These behaviors describe a pattern in which the liturgy becomes a tightly controlled space meant to feel safe through predictability. Precise rubrical execution means insisting that every ritual detail be performed exactly by the book. Rigid policing of posture refers to strictly enforcing how people stand, kneel, or gesture. Idealizing a past liturgical moment means romanticizing an earlier era of worship as the only truly authentic form. Together, they reflect a need for control expressed through strict attention to external forms.

Finally, the S.A.F.E. need for *Expectation Control Through Structure* manifested in the absolutizing of liturgical norms. Structure ordinarily reduces uncertainty, however, when elevated into an inflexible system, it becomes a way to avoid vulnerability or genuine encounter. This dynamic was evident in communities where even minor liturgical variations were interpreted as threats to orthodoxy or ecclesial identity. Psychologists note that when individuals feel overwhelmed by change, they often cling to rigid structures as a way to maintain internal equilibrium.[56] In these contexts, liturgical structure ceased to be a means of worship and instead became a psychological shield.

The result of these joining dynamics was a pattern of confessional rigidity that cannot be explained by theology alone. The post-conciliar tensions reveal how Catholic extremes often arise not from doctrinal conviction but from the activation of S.A.F.E. needs under conditions of perceived threat. When Stability, Answers, Familiarity, and Structure become absolutized, they in turn generate a defensive posture that *deflects development*, *dampens discernment*, and *divides dwelling* (communion). This case demonstrates that confessional extremes are best understood through an interdisciplinary lens, that is, one that integrates theological, anthropological, psychological, and sociological analysis.

[56] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 152. As van der Kolk notes, trauma destabilizes the body's capacity for regulation, making unpredictability feel threatening; in response, individuals often cling to rigid routines or structures because these provide the predictability and control needed to restore a sense of internal safety.

3. Protestant Psychological Dispositions

Protestant spirituality came to emphasize three main aspects: the primacy of Scripture, the authority of conscience, and the immediacy of personal faith which developed through a merging of late-medieval dissatisfaction,[57] humanist renewal (i.e., the Renaissance movement that called Christians back to the sources: biblical, linguistic, moral, and patristic), and theological breakthrough. By the fifteenth century, many Christians experienced the Church's sacramental and juridical systems as spiritually distant or overly mediated, thus prompting a growing desire for direct access to God. Various lay movements such as the Devotio Moderna already stressed interior devotion and moral conscience, while Renaissance humanism encouraged a return to biblical sources and critical engagement with Scripture in its original languages. It was in turn these cultural and intellectual shifts that prepared the ground for the Reformation's central claims. Luther's own spiritual crisis (marked by anxiety, a longing for assurance, and distrust of institutional mechanisms of salvation) led him to articulate a theology in which the believer encounters God immediately through faith in Christ, with Scripture (i.e., inerrant divine revelation) functioning as the final authority that binds a person's conscience. Luther's insistence at Worms

[57] Late-medieval dissatisfaction arose from a widespread collapse of confidence in the (Roman Catholic) Church's spiritual and institutional reliability. The Western Schism had already shattered the credibility of papal authority, while clerical worldliness, financial abuses, and the growing bureaucratic rigidity of canon-law governance made the Church feel distant from the pastoral and spiritual needs of ordinary believers. In sum, many Christians perceived the institution as politically entangled, morally compromised, and spiritually ineffective. At the same time, lay devotional movements, vernacular spirituality (i.e., forms of Christian devotion, prayer, and religious practice that emerged outside formal clerical structures and were expressed in the everyday language, culture, and experience of ordinary believers), and mystical traditions signaled a hunger for more immediate, interior, and morally serious forms of piety. Humanist critiques of clerical ignorance and appeals to return to Scripture and the early Church further intensified the sense that the Church had drifted from its spiritual center. Together, these pressures created a climate in which believers longed for direct access to God, clearer spiritual authority, and a more personal, less mediated form of faith. It was these conditions that made the Protestant emphases on Scripture, conscience, and personal trust in Christ both compelling and necessary.

that "my conscience is captive to the Word of God" crystallized a new spiritual position in which conscience, illuminated by Scripture, stands above ecclesial coercion.[58]

As printing technology expanded access to vernacular Bibles and literacy increased among laypeople, these theological insights became embedded in Protestant identity. In addition, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers reframed mediation by teaching that Christ alone stands between God and humanity and that every Christian participates in a spiritual priesthood grounded in personal faith rather than hierarchical structures. From a more sociological perspective, the weakening of centralized ecclesial authority and the rise of nation-states further reinforced decentralized patterns of religious authority,[59] and theologically, Scripture became the normative source of truth. Psychologically, conscience became the locus of responsibility and assurance with orientation toward interiority, authenticity, and moral agency.[60] From the view of human studies (anthropology), literacy and personal agency shaped religious practice by decentralizing *ritual* and *rulership* (authority), thus placing interpretive responsibility on the individual. Sociologically stated, new confessional communities formed around these principles which fostered *diversity*, *development,* and *division* (fragmentation).[61] In sum, these forces produced a spirituality centered on direct engagement with the *Canon* (God's Word), the moral and doctrinal responsibility of the individual *conscience*, and a personal, unmediated relationship with *Christ* that remains a defining feature of Protestant identity.

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[58] Luther's appearance at the Diet of Worms in 1521 became the defining moment in which Protestant spirituality's core emphases (i.e., Scripture, conscience, and personal faith) were crystallized in a single dramatic act. Summoned before Emperor Charles V and the imperial authorities, Luther was ordered to recant his writings. Yet, instead of appealing to ecclesial hierarchy or tradition, he in turn grounded his refusal entirely in the authority of Scripture and the integrity of conscience. His declaration that he could not act "against conscience" unless convinced by "Scripture and clear reason" signaled a decisive shift in the locus of spiritual authority. In that moment, Luther articulated a new spiritual position in which the believer stands directly before God, accountable not to institutional coercion but to the Word of God as personally received and inwardly affirmed. The Diet of Worms thus became the symbolic birth of a spirituality centered on the primacy of Scripture, the binding authority of conscience, and the immediacy of personal trust in Christ, setting the trajectory for Protestant identity in the centuries that followed.

[59] Sociologically, the weakening of centralized ecclesial authority and the rise of nation-states reinforced decentralized religious authority because political power and spiritual oversight increasingly shifted to local rulers rather than Rome. For example, German princes asserted control over church reforms in their territories, Scandinavian monarchs nationalized their churches, and England placed ecclesial governance under the crown. These developments tied religious identity to regional political structures, making localized, Scripture-centered, conscience-driven forms of authority both plausible and durable.

[60] Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 89.

[61] Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 55.

3.1. Healthy Expressions

Personal Responsibility

Protestantism encourages believers to take ownership of their spiritual lives which from a theological perspective, reflects the priesthood of all believers. As a result, decentralized religious authority makes personal responsibility essential because it reshapes how individuals relate to Scripture, self, and community. Considering it via anthropology, it invites believers to engage Scripture and tradition directly rather than relying solely on clerical mediation and thus redirects them into active participants in the community's symbolic and ritual world. Considering it psychologically, it strengthens self-differentiation and moral agency by requiring individuals to form convictions, interpret Scripture, and make ethical decisions from within rather than deferring to external authority for certainty or direction. From the point of sociology it fosters participatory forms of community in which leadership, discernment, and accountability are shared rather than concentrated, thus making the health of the church dependent on the active involvement and integrity of its members.[62] Therefore, when taken together these dynamics cultivate a spirituality in which personal responsibility is not an optional add-on, but rather it becomes foundational to the life of faith.

Scriptural Devotion

Scripture is central to Protestant identity as we have already noted. In a theological context it is viewed as the normative witness to God's revelation while anthropologically, it shapes communal narratives and moral frameworks.[63] Studied within the arena of psychology, it provides a stable reference point for meaning-making in that Scripture provides a stable reference point anchoring the believer's inner life in a coherent, enduring story that does not shift with circumstances. Thus it offers a consistent framework for interpreting experiences, reducing

[62] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67.

[63] Scripture shapes Protestant identity by functioning as the community's primary symbolic world, the shared narrative and moral universe within which believers learn who they are, how they belong, and what a faithful life looks like. Because Protestantism locates ultimate authority in the biblical text, Scripture becomes *the* central cultural artifact that organizes communal memory, ritual practice, and moral imagination. It provides the stories that define the community's origins, the metaphors that structure its worldview, and the ethical patterns that guide daily life. In sum, Scripture does not just simply inform doctrine, it forms a people, and supplies the narrative grammar through which Protestants interpret their experiences, understand their obligations, and discern their place within God's redemptive history. Thus, anthropologically, Scripture becomes the "anchor" of communal identity and the framework through which moral responsibility is learned, lived, and lodged within the community across generations.

uncertainty, and organizing identity, and therefore allowing individuals to navigate ambiguity with greater confidence and internal stability. This ties into its sociology in that it unites diverse communities around a shared text.[64]

Authenticity

Authenticity is a hallmark of Protestant spirituality because, theologically, sincerity of faith is understood as the very locus of a person's relationship with God. In Protestant theology and thought, what ultimately matters is not external conformity, inherited ritual, or participation in sacramental systems, but the genuineness of one's personal trust in Christ. And since salvation is received by faith rather than mediated primarily through institutional structures, the inner posture of the heart becomes central. This in turn makes sincerity not just a moral virtue but an actual theological necessity. Faith must be real, personal, and inwardly grounded rather than performed for social approval or some kind of ecclesial expectation. In this particular framework, it is authenticity that contributes to safeguarding the integrity of the believer's relationship with God by insisting that faith be lived from *conviction* rather than *compulsion*, and that one's outward life reflect the *truth* of one's inward *trust.* This supports the anthropological view that it values personal testimony and lived experience. In a psychological sense it encourages congruence or equivalence between *belief* and *behavior* by pushing individuals to align their *outward conduct* with their *inward convictions*. It is when authenticity is valued that the self seeks *coherence* rather than *contradiction*, and thus reducing internal conflict and fostering a stable, integrated sense of identity. Sociologically, it resists performative religiosity.[65]

Moral Seriousness

Protestantism often cultivates a strong sense of ethical responsibility which tends to come from a theological call to holiness.[66] When studied within the framework of anthropology, it shapes

[64] N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 14.

[65] Taylor, *Sources of the Self* , 507. Taylor's point is that Protestant authenticity does not remain an inward ideal but becomes a social force. When sincerity of faith is treated as essential, believers feel compelled to bring their outer world into alignment with their inner convictions. This creates a powerful moral energy that pushes individuals and communities toward reform (e.g., challenging unjust structures, reshaping institutions, pursuing social goods that reflect their understanding of God's will, etc.). In doing so authenticity becomes sociologically generative, or to state it this way: the demand for inward integrity in turn produces outward activism, thus making Protestant cultures fertile ground for movements aimed at moral, political, and social transformation.

[66] "Be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). This line is a direct quotation of Leviticus, where God calls Israel to reflect His character. Peter applies it to the church, grounding Christian holiness in God's own nature. "A chosen

communal norms regarding expected moral and ethical behavior. Through psychology it fosters conscientiousness[67] because authenticity trains individuals to take their inner *commitments seriously* and to follow through on them in *concrete situations*. When sincerity of faith is treated as essential, people tend to become more attentive to the moral and ethical implications of their choices, more reflective about their motives, and more disciplined in aligning daily habits with their professed beliefs. This inward-to-outward consistency cultivates a mindset of *care, commitment*, and *conscientious conduct* (all hallmarks of conscientiousness) because the believer learns to treat every action as an expression of genuinely held conviction rather than mere compliance or performance. Viewed sociologically it motivates social reform movements (as we have previously noted).[68]

3.2. Distorted Expressions

While Protestantism engages in healthy expressions, under pressure, Protestant dispositions can devolve into the triad of Autonomy → Anarchy → Alienation.

Autonomy: Hyper-Individualism

Autonomy can become distorted when personal interpretation eclipses communal wisdom. Theologically, this can lead to a strictly privatized faith. In other words, it becomes an unhealthy distortion when the emphasis on sincerity is *severed from the communal and sacramental dimensions of Christian life*. When authenticity is interpreted as purely inward (e.g., "my faith, my feelings, my private relationship with God") it can collapse the theological vision of the church into an individualized spirituality. The result is that instead of sincerity deepening one's

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race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9). Here Peter describes the church using Israel's covenant titles, emphasizing that believers are set apart for God's service and called to mediate His presence to the world.

[67] Conscientiousness is the tendency to act with care, responsibility, and steady follow-through, marked by diligence, organization, and attention to moral or practical obligations. It develops as individuals repeatedly practice aligning their actions with their convictions and learning to follow through on commitments, regulate impulses, and reflect on the moral weight of their choices. Over time, these habits become internalized, forming a stable disposition of disciplined, responsible conduct. In religious contexts that prize sincerity, this formation is intensified in that believers are encouraged to examine their motives, live consistently with their faith, and treat daily decisions as expressions of genuine commitment, further strengthening conscientiousness as a durable trait.

[68] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930), 43. Weber's point is that Protestant authenticity generates outward moral action. When believers feel compelled to live their faith sincerely, they also feel responsible for shaping society to reflect their convictions. This inward moral seriousness produces a distinctive drive toward disciplined action, making Protestants likely to challenge injustices, reform institutions, and pursue social improvement. By way of this process, authenticity becomes a sociological engine for reform movements.

participation in the body of Christ, it can shrink faith to a personal interior state that requires neither *communal accountability* nor *communal actions*. This privatization in turn actually weakens the formative role of worship, doctrine, and community, turning faith into a solitary psychological experience rather than a lived participation in God's people. Therefore, anthropologically it erodes a shared ritual life and psychologically it reflects resistance to a healthy vulnerability or accountability within relationships. Furthermore, it fuels sociological fragmentation because when authenticity is defined primarily as being true to one's own inner convictions, *individuals begin to treat their personal moral intuitions as the highest authority*.[69] Instead of shared norms, communal practices, or institutional structures holding a community together, each person becomes a kind of self-authorizing moral agent. Over the course of time this weakens common frameworks, erodes the collective identity, and encourages people to form smaller, like-minded groups that reflect their own sense of "true" belief or practice (the result is a pattern of splintering where communities divide, subgroups multiply, and social cohesion thins as personal authenticity outweighs shared commitments).[70]

Anarchy: Suspicion of All Authority

Suspicion becomes pathological when it undermines trust in any form of leadership or tradition and it is here that theologically it rejects the historical Church. Suspicion became a recurring Protestant impulse because the Reformation began as a protest against abuses of authority (e.g., corrupt leadership, distorted doctrine, and traditions seen as obscuring the gospel). This initially bred a healthy vigilance and desire to test all things by Scripture and to resist any authority that contradicted God's Word. However, that same vigilance can slide into pathology when it expands beyond its original purpose for when suspicion no longer distinguishes between

[69] In Christian theology, the highest authority is God's self-revelation, made known through Scripture, the person of Christ, and the teaching and life of the Church. Where fragmentation arises is when authenticity shifts the center of authority from these shared, objective sources to the individual's private moral intuition. Instead of submitting personal judgment to God's revealed will, the self becomes the final arbiter. Classic Christian thought insists the opposite: God's revealed truth (not personal feeling) is the supreme norm for belief and practice, and the community of faith helps interpret and embody that truth across time. How is this reconciled with Luther's pronouncement at Worms? Simply put, Luther's appeal to conscience does not endorse individual moral autonomy but underscores that the believer is bound to God's revealed Word above all other authorities. His "captive conscience" is not self-authorizing, but rather it is accountable to Scripture and formed within the community of faith. The later distortion arises when authenticity shifts from a conscience bound to God's truth to a conscience defined by personal intuition, turning the self into the final arbiter. Luther's view resists fragmentation because it anchors conviction in shared revelation, whereas modern expressive individualism untethers conscience from any authority beyond the self.

[70] James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 112.

corrupt authority and legitimate authority, it begins to erode trust *in any form of leadership*, tradition, or communal guidance. At that point, theologically, it risks rejecting not just specific abuses *but the very idea* of the historical Church as a bearer of wisdom, continuity, and interpretive stability. What began as a principled critique can devolve into a reflexive distrust that fragments community and isolates the believer from the shared life of the Church across time. In turn we can see that anthropologically it destabilizes communal identity and psychologically it reflects unresolved wounds around coercion. From the perspective of sociology it leads to anti-institutionalism because once personal authenticity becomes the primary measure of religious truth, formal structures (e.g., churches, denominations, councils, creeds, etc.) begin to feel unnecessary or even obstructive. If the individual's inner conviction is treated as the ultimate authority, then institutions appear secondary, burdensome, or suspect. Eventually this weakens loyalty to shared practices, erodes confidence in organized leadership, and encourages believers to seek spiritual fulfillment outside established communities. The culminating result is a cultural pattern in which institutions are viewed not as guardians of wisdom or sources of stability, but as threats to personal sincerity, thus fueling a preference for informal, fluid, and highly individualized forms of religious life.[71]

Alienation: Doctrinal Pride and Isolation

Alienation arises when purity (when originally a spiritual aspiration) actually mutates into a "badge" of superiority. In this shift, purity ceases to function as a path toward interior transformation and instead becomes a mechanism for distinguishing the "worthy" from the "unworthy." Generally, the result is predictable in the form of relational distance, communal fragmentation, and internalized shame. When purity becomes performative rather than transformative, it divides rather than heals.[72]

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[71] Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 91. Smith's analysis argues that evangelical culture is shaped by what he calls "pervasive anti-institutionalism" (a deep suspicion of formal structures, hierarchy, and tradition). On page 91, he emphasizes that evangelicals often valorize individual experience, personal conviction, and inward authenticity over institutional authority. This produces a religious ethos in which institutions are tolerated only insofar as they serve the individual's spiritual needs; once they appear constraining, they are bypassed, ignored, or abandoned.

[72] Internalized shame emerges in this dynamic because the moment purity becomes a badge of superiority, it also becomes a standard that most people inevitably fail to meet. When purity shifts from an inner journey of transformation to an external marker that separates the "worthy" from the "unworthy," individuals begin to measure themselves against an ideal that is rigid, performative, and often unattainable. Those who cannot maintain the expected level of purity (whether moral, doctrinal, or ritual) start to see their shortcomings not as part of the normal human struggle but as evidence that something is fundamentally wrong with them. If left unchecked and persistent, it

From a theological perspective, purity becomes distorted when it shifts from sanctification to self-justification. Augustine warns that pride is the "perverse imitation of God,"[73] and purity-as-superiority embodies this distortion in that holiness becomes a performance of moral elevation rather than participation in divine grace (the latter being based on a loving relationship with the Creator). Thus, theological claims are no longer oriented toward God but toward the maintenance of an idealized self-image.

Purity functions anthropologically as a boundary-making mechanism. For example, Mary Douglas argues that purity systems define what is "in place" and "out of place," thereby sustaining social order.[74] Her point is simply that purity rules help a community keep its world orderly. Therefore, by labeling things as "in place" or "out of place," a group uses purity to mark boundaries, maintain structure, and prevent confusion about what belongs within the community's shared life. When purity becomes a status marker, these boundaries harden into hierarchies and belonging becomes conditional, communal life stratifies around perceived levels of purity, and rituals and symbols that once fostered cohesion now reinforce exclusion.

Purity-as-superiority emerges psychologically from anxiety, insecurity, or unresolved trauma. In regard to this, Johnathan Haidt notes that purity intuitions are tied to disgust and threat-avoidance,[75] so when individuals feel existentially unstable, purity codes offer predictability and control. However, this control is purchased at the cost of relational openness in that others become *contaminants* rather than *companions*. Thus the purity system becomes a defensive structure that protects a fragile self but simultaneously isolates it.

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eventually produces internalized shame, the painful belief that one is defective, inadequate, or spiritually inferior. Instead of fostering growth, the purity system actually becomes a mirror that reflects back a sense of failure. This is why communities organized around "purity-as-status" tend to generate alienation and fragmentation in that people either withdraw to hide their perceived inadequacy or overcompensate through perfectionism, judgment, or scrupulosity. In both cases, the original spiritual aspiration is lost, replaced by a corrosive self-evaluation that wounds the very identity it was meant to elevate.

[73] Augustine, *City of God*, 14.13.Translated by Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 571. Instead of receiving life, goodness, and truth as gifts, pride attempts to *possess* them as if they originate from the self. In Augustine's view, the proud person does not reject God outright but mimics divine qualities (e.g., self-sufficiency, autonomy, exaltation) without the humility, love, or dependence that define true participation in God's life. Therefore, pride becomes a distorted copy of divinity, that is, a grasping for greatness detached from grace. In other words, a desire to be "like God" but on one's own terms.

[74] Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* 44.

[75] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 89. Haidt is an American social and moral psychologist known for his research on how people form moral judgments and why groups (religious, political, or cultural) disagree so intensely. His book *The Righteous Mind* applies the research of moral foundations theory to explain why good, sincere people are often divided by politics and religion.

Sociologically speaking, purity becomes a tool for boundary maintenance and group identity where communities elevate purity norms to preserve cohesion, especially under perceived threat. Over the course of time these "norms" become markers of insider status, reinforcing social stratification and suppressing dissent. In addition, the group's collective memory becomes curated around narratives of moral distinction that further entrenches alienation from others. In other words, the community begins telling its own story in a way that highlights its moral superiority and downplays its flaws, thus creating a shared narrative that reinforces who is "in" and who is "out." Eventually these selective memories function like a moral filter in that they celebrate the group's *virtues*, ignore its *vices* (and failures), and portray outsiders as *deficient or dangerous*. This curated storytelling[76] deepens the sense of separation because members come to see themselves not just as different, *but as fundamentally better*, and therefore making genuine connection with others increasingly difficult.

To illustrate with a brief example (liturgical purity as social hierarchy) that in a parish or church where a subset of members view themselves as guardians of liturgical correctness, reverence gradually becomes a badge of superiority. They in turn critique newcomers for improper posture, dismiss other churches or religious groups as being insufficiently orthodox, and subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) shame those who do not conform. Thus, what began as devotion has turned into a hierarchy of worthiness and results in newcomers feeling *illicit* (unwelcome), long-time members feel *interrogated* (scrutinized), and the "pure" group becomes increasingly *isolated*. In short, purity, when detached from charity, mercy, and grace, produces alienation.

3.3. Underlying Needs (R.I.G.I.D.)

In contrast to Catholic extremes often arising from S.A.F.E. needs, (as previously discussed), Protestant extremes often arise from the R.I.G.I.D. pattern.

Reactivity to Perceived Coercion

Reactivity is rooted in historical trauma around authority and manifests as reflexive resistance to external constraints.[77] In other words, Haidt argues that people's reactions to authority

[76] More specifically in this context I am referring to someone, or a group, that means to *select, shape, and present* their "story" with a particular purpose in mind. When applied to collective memory, it means the group is not simply remembering everything that happened, but rather it is choosing which stories to highlight, which to ignore, and how to frame them in order to reinforce a certain identity or message.

[77] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 89.

are shaped far more by deep-seated intuitions (e.g., often formed by past experiences, cultural history, inherited group trauma) than by conscious reasoning. Therefore, when a community has a history of being harmed, controlled, or betrayed by authority, its members develop moral intuitions that treat external constraints as inherently threatening. These intuitions operate automatically, long before rational thought kicks in.

Identity Fusion With One's Interpretation

Interpretive identity fusion makes disagreement feel like a personal attack, intensifying defensiveness.[78] The point being made is that when people fuse their sense of self with their group, the group's beliefs become indistinguishable from their own. It is in that fused state that any attempt at disagreement is no longer just a difference of opinion but instead feels like a personal threat. Therefore, any kind of critique or constructive criticism or questioning is interpreted as an attack on one's worth or integrity. This in turn results in defensiveness rising quickly and openness to dialogue collapsing. In sum, the tighter the fusion, the more any challenge to the group provokes a reflexive or reactive need to protect the self.

Group-threat Perception Toward Other Traditions

Group threat amplifies suspicion and fuels polemics, especially toward Catholicism. Allport's insight on this is keen, explaining that when a group feels threatened, it becomes far more suspicious of those outside its boundaries, and that suspicion easily turns into hostile rhetoric. For example, perceived danger heightens vigilance, and in turn makes differences seem threatening and outsiders appear untrustworthy or destabilizing. In many Protestant-majority contexts, Catholicism historically carried the markers (hierarchy, foreignness, allegiance to an external authority, etc.) that anxious groups interpret as risks. Therefore, as a result group threat reliably amplifies polemics toward Catholicism because attacking the "dangerous other" helps the threatened group reinforce its own identity and cohesion. [79]

Insecurity About Doctrinal Purity

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[78] Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 255.

[79] Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1954), 67. Allport's point is that perceived threat makes groups defensive, and defensiveness expresses itself through suspicion and hostile rhetoric. He speaks of anti-Catholicism specifically as it often absorbed this hostility because it embodied the traits that anxious groups interpret as dangerous (i.e., difference, hierarchy, and external authority).

Purity anxiety drives constant boundary-policing and suspicion of compromise. In other words, when people hold to a strict ideal (such as a purity standard) any hint of inconsistency creates uncomfortable cognitive dissonance and to relieve that tension, they double down on the ideal, tighten boundaries, and scrutinize anything that might introduce ambiguity or compromise.[80] Thus the anxiety of maintaining purity therefore fuels constant vigilance by policing who belongs, what counts as acceptable, and where lines must be drawn. Through this pattern the fear of internal contradiction drives the very rigidity and suspicion that sustain purity-based systems.[81]

Defensiveness Toward Critique

Defensiveness emerges when critique is interpreted as coercion rather than dialogue. Thus when a person no longer hears it as an invitation to think, reflect, or engage they hear it as an attempt to control them. That shift in mindset changes everything in that instead of processing the content of the critique, the nervous system moves into protection mode. The person's primary goal (in some cases even solitary goal) now becomes defending autonomy rather than open-mindedly trying to understand the issue. In the end, what might have been a conversation now feels like a threat to agency, dignity, or self-definition. In that state, even gentle feedback can trigger resistance, because the underlying fear is, "You're trying to make me change," rather than, "You're trying to help me grow."[82]

3.4. Case Example: The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy as a R.I.G.I.D. Pattern

A historically concrete example of the R.I.G.I.D. dynamics within Protestant extremity appears in the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy of the early twentieth century.[83] While the

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[80] Cognitive dissonance is the inner tension that arises when a person encounters information or experiences that contradict what they already believe or need to be true. For many, this tension feels threatening because it destabilizes the sense of coherence that anchors identity and belonging. When beliefs function as psychological shelter (e.g., providing certainty, continuity, or protection from past wounds) any contradiction can feel like an intrusion into that shelter. Instead of a small intellectual conflict, dissonance becomes a challenge to one's stability, social acceptance, and moral self-understanding. As a result, people often react not by reconsidering the belief but by defending against the discomfort, tightening boundaries, or rejecting the dissonant material in order to preserve a fragile sense of internal safety.

[81] Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 93.

[82] Aaron Beck, *Prisoners of Hate* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 44.

[83] The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy was an early twentieth century struggle within American Protestantism over how Christianity should respond to modernity. Fundamentalists insisted on biblical inerrancy, traditional doctrines, and resistance to higher criticism, evolution, and liberal theology while Modernists sought to reconcile Christianity with scientific advances, historical-critical methods, and contemporary culture. The conflict resulted in fractured denominations, reshaped seminaries, and produced lasting institutional divides. It ultimately

controversy has often been framed as a doctrinal dispute over biblical inspiration, miracles, and the authority of Scripture, the emotional intensity and division that followed reveal a deeper psychological pattern that is consistent with Reactivity, Identity Fusion, Group Threat, Insecurity, and Defensiveness.

The controversy unfolded during a period of rapid social change (e.g., industrialization, immigration, scientific advancement, shifting moral norms, etc.) in which these pressures triggered a reactive position toward perceived coercion (in particular among more conservative Protestants who felt that denominational elites and academic theologians were imposing modernist interpretations on the church). As George Marsden notes, many fundamentalists interpreted even modest theological nuance as an attempt to "force capitulation to liberalism," triggering reflexive resistance.[84]

This reactivity quickly fused with identity-level attachment to one's interpretation or view of Scripture. For many Protestant conservatives biblical inerrancy was not just a doctrinal position held, but even more so it stood as a (if not *the*) core component of personal and communal identity.[85] What resulted is that any disagreement felt existentially threatening for individuals and the group. It was in 1929 when Princeton Seminary revised its faculty standards that conservatives interpreted the change not as an academic adjustment but as a personal betrayal of the Gospel itself.[86]/[87]

Simultaneously, group threat perception intensified where fundamentalists increasingly viewed modernists not as fellow misguided Christians but as enemies within their camp. This

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crystallizing two competing visions of Protestant identity with one centered on doctrinal certainty and authority and the other on adaptation and intellectual openness.

[84] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 125.

[85] Ernest Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 210.

[86] Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 143.

[87] Prior to the early 1900s, Princeton Theological Seminary functioned as the intellectual and spiritual center of Old School, Reformed Presbyterianism, combining rigorous academic theology with warm evangelical piety. It upheld strict adherence to the Westminster Standards, resisted theological innovations such as higher criticism, and championed a rational, systematic approach to doctrine shaped by Scottish Common Sense philosophy. Under figures like Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, and later A.A. Hodge, the seminary cultivated a reputation for uniting scholarly precision with experiential faith, forming pastors and missionaries who embodied both doctrinal orthodoxy and devotional seriousness. Rooted in the legacy of the Log College and the First Great Awakening, Princeton saw itself as stewarding a tradition that blended Calvin's theological depth with the evangelical fervor of early American revivalism, making it one of the most influential and conservative theological institutions in the United States during the nineteenth century.

threat perception was not just within their own ranks but it also extended outward as well (e.g., Catholicism, higher criticism, and secular science were all framed as coordinated forces undermining Protestant identity).[88] Therefore, the controversy eventually became less about doctrinal clarity and more about protecting the group from perceived encroachment.

Further underlying of these reactions was a deep insecurity about doctrinal purity in that the fear of compromise led to escalating "boundary policing" by tightening up creeds, redrawing the lines of fellowship, and denominational splits, all of which were viewed as justified and necessary acts of purification, [89] and even minor deviations from approved formulations were treated as evidence of creeping apostasy.

Finally, defensiveness toward critique became (like biblical inerrancy, previously mentioned) a defining feature of the movement where *any questioning* of fundamentalist positions was interpreted as *coercive leverage* or a *capitulation to liberalism*. As sociologist Nancy Ammerman observes, *critique* was rarely received as *conversation,* and instead it was experienced as an attack on the *integrity of the Bible* (or Gospel) and the *identity of the believer*.[90]

The ultimate result was a cycle of fragmentation, suspicion, and escalating ferocity in which the controversy produced multiple denominational splits, the creation of parallel institutions, and a long lasting position of cultural embattlement. The R.I.G.I.D. pattern thus provides a more accurate explanation of the conflict's intensity than doctrinal disagreement alone. Theological claims became proxies for psychological needs, i.e., reactivity, identity protection, group security, purity anxiety, and defensive self-preservation.[91] Together, these patterns reveal a striking structural symmetry.

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[88] Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 58.

[89] Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 92.

[90] Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 44.

[91] The defensive patterns forged in the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy unquestionably persist into the twenty-first century, though in updated cultural forms. For example, many conservative Protestant communities still interpret internal critique or theological questioning as evidence of compromise, drift, or capitulation to secular liberalism, which keeps the embattled posture alive. This is visible in contemporary disputes over biblical authority, gender, sexuality, science, and political identity, where disagreement is often framed as a threat to the Gospel rather than a normal part of discernment. As a result, the movement continues to generate parallel institutions (e.g., seminaries, media networks, homeschooling systems, publishing systems, etc.) all designed to "protect" believers from perceived outside influence. The same cycle of fragmentation, suspicion, and reactive boundary-tightening that characterized the early twentieth century thus remains operative, revealing that the fundamentalist impulse endures less as a doctrinal stance and more as a durable psychological and sociological style of identity maintenance.

The following tables maps how trauma-driven dysregulation produces parallel forms of confessional rigidity in Catholic and Protestant contexts.

Table 2. R.I.G.I.D. vs. S.A.F.E. Motivations

Framework	Description	Manifestation
R.I.G.I.D.	Reactivity, Identity-fusion, Group-threat, Insecurity, Defensiveness	Protestants fear coercion; Catholics fear fragmentation.
S.A.F.E.	Stability, Answers, Familiarity, Expectation-control	Both cling to rigid systems to bypass anxiety.
Emotional Driver	Fear of loss (Identity/Structure)	Fear of ambiguity (Truth/Safety)
Behavioral Outcome	Polemics, withdrawal, suspicion	Legalism, literalism, absolutism

Table 3. Comparative Typology of Confessional Extremes

Psychological Category	The Catholic Extreme (Institutional Fixation)	The Protestant Extreme (Individual Fixation)
Core Distorted Triad	Control → Certainty → Closure: Reliance on hierarchy and law to eliminate ambiguity.	Autonomy → Anarchy → Alienation: Hyper-individualism leading to isolation and pride.
Underlying Motivations	S.A.F.E. Needs: Seeking Stability, Answers, Familiarity, and Expectation control.	R.I.G.I.D. Pattern: Driven by Reactivity, Identity fusion, Group threat, Insecurity, and Defensiveness.
Primary Shadow	Authoritarianism: Submitting the conscience to the institution to avoid the risk of error.	Hyper-Individualism: Elevating personal interpretation above the wisdom of the community.

Reaction to the "Other"	Projection: Sees the Protestant as a source of "chaos" and "subjectivism."	Projection: Sees the Catholic as a victim of "tyranny" and "superstition."
Fixation Point	External Boundary: Validation through valid orders, ancient lineage, and correct rubrics.	Internal Boundary: Validation through doctrinal purity and "uncompromised" personal conviction.
The Resulting Ferocity	Institutional Triumphalism: Dismissing all others as "outside" the only visible vessel of grace.	Sectarian Purism: Dismissing all others as part of a "corrupt" or "apostate" system.

3.5 The Psychological Deadlock

The table illustrates how both the S.A.F.E. and R.I.G.I.D. patterns function as universal mechanisms of dysregulation, driving Catholics and Protestants toward parallel forms of separation. Whether the originating wound is the loss of a grand institutional center or the fear of a compromised conscience, the outcome is the same for both, i.e., a retreat from dialogue that forecloses the very conditions needed for healing. Despite arising from distinct historical and theological pressures, the two traditions display a striking structural symmetry in their responses to trauma in that each one moves toward withdrawal, boundary-hardening, and defensive certainty. This transpires even as the sayings, expressions, and symbols may differ. The comparative mapping makes this mirroring unmistakable by showing that institutional authority and individual conscience become opposite poles animated *by the same underlying anxieties*, so that what appears as confessional opposition is, at the psychological level, a shared vulnerability expressed through different forms. This convergence prepares the ground for the Mirror Effect: the dynamic in which each tradition reflects and intensifies the other's fears, generating a cycle of mutual reactivity that neither can easily escape.

4. The Mirror Effect: How Extremes Resemble Each Other

Despite their differences, Catholic and Protestant extremes mirror one another through the triad of Projection → Polarization → Paranoia. This dynamic reveals that confessional hostility is not just doctrinal but psychological.[92]

Projection

Each tradition projects its internal fears onto the other. Catholics project anxieties about internal fragmentation onto Protestants, interpreting Protestant diversity as chaos. Protestants project anxieties about internal coercion onto Catholics, interpreting Catholic hierarchy as tyranny.[93] Thus, projection externalizes internal conflict and in turn allows each group to avoid confronting its own vulnerabilities.[94]

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[92] René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 12. Girard's opening chapters describe how mimetic rivalry leads communities to resolve internal tensions by identifying a scapegoat, a process driven more by fear than reason. Around page 12, he shows that groups typically project their anxieties outward, generating polarization as they unite against a perceived threat, and escalating into a kind of paranoia that stabilizes the group through shared hostility rather than through truth. Thus, this mechanism is psychological rather than doctrinal, with the fiercest conflicts arising between groups that are most alike (what Girard calls mimetic doubles). In their rigid forms, Catholics and Protestants exemplify this pattern in that each tradition mirrors the other's defensiveness, engages in identity fortressing when threatened, and participates in the same cycle of what this paper presents as Projection → Polarization → Paranoia. Thus this triad captures the essence of Girard's scapegoat mechanism as it operates within confessional antagonism.

[93] The following two examples stand out as the most incisive, symmetrical, and analytically: 1) Catholics project anxieties about internal fragmentation onto Protestants, interpreting Protestant diversity as the embodiment of their own fears about ecclesial disunity (intensified in the post-Vatican II era but rooted in much older historical patterns). 2) Protestants project anxieties about authoritarian overreach onto Catholics, interpreting Catholic hierarchy as the embodiment of their own fears about coercion and the loss of interpretive freedom (intensified during the Fundamentalist-Modernist crisis but rooted in much older Protestant struggles over authority, conscience, and ecclesial control). These two lines capture the *core mimetic symmetry* with maximum clarity in that each tradition externalizes precisely the vulnerability it most fears within itself.

[94] Carl Jung, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 92.

Polarization

Projection inevitably leads to polarization wherein each tradition retreats into its defensive fortress. Catholics retreat into institutional authority as a bulwark against perceived relativism, for example seeking stability in magisterial continuity when doctrinal or cultural ambiguity feels threatening. Protestants on the other hand retreat into interpretive autonomy as a bulwark against perceived authoritarianism, for example seeking security in personal conscience and Scripture when external control begins to feel intrusive or coercive.

Polarization transforms difference into danger. Sociologist Erving Goffman's analysis shows that groups depend on shared rituals and a stable "interaction order" to preserve identity, and any disruption to that order is experienced as a threat. When differences arise-whether in behavior, belief, or symbolic practice-they create interactional tension that unsettles the group's sense of coherence. To relieve this tension, the group tightens boundaries and forms defensive solidarity, reframing even minor deviations as signs of danger. Accordingly, Goffman helps explain why polarization transforms difference into danger: once the ritual equilibrium feels threatened, the group interprets difference not as variation but as violation, and thus as something requiring protection, resistance, or exclusion.[95]

Paranoia

Over an extended period of time polarization can then harden into paranoia. Catholics fear that Protestantism threatens the Church's unity and sacramental coherence, reading Protestant diversity as a risk to the visible continuity of faith and worship. Protestants fear that Catholicism threatens the Gospel's freedom and purity, reading Catholic authority and sacramentality as a risk to personal conscience and unmediated access to Scripture.

Therefore, paranoia reframes the other not as a sibling in Christ but as an existential threat. As Volf argues, once fear governs the imagination, others are no longer perceived through the lens of shared humanity or shared baptism but rather through the "logic" of exclusion. Paranoia reframes the other not as a sibling in Christ but as an existential threat whose very presence appears

[95] Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 23. Goffman was a Canadian-American sociologist whose work fundamentally reshaped how scholars understand everyday social life. He is widely regarded as one of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century because he revealed that ordinary interactions (e.g., greetings, gestures, rituals, deference, face-work) are not trivial but are the micro-structures that hold society together. Goffman showed that people constantly manage impressions, protect social "face," and participate in rituals that maintain their group order. His work explains why groups react so strongly when their symbolic world feels threatened.

to endanger one's identity, purity, or community. Thus in this mode, the boundary between "us" and "them" hardens into a moral absolute, and the possibility of embrace is obscured by the impulse to defend, fortify, and expel.[96]

In sum, the Mirror Effect: Projection → Polarization → Paranoia reveals that while the justifications are opposites, the psychological outcome is identical. With projection each side projects its own "shadow" (the fear of being wrong or powerless) onto the other. For polarization, the Catholic retreats into the "Fortress of the Institution" while the Protestant retreats into the "Fortress of the Conscience." And, with paranoia both eventually view the other not as a brother or sister in error, but as a direct threat to the survival of the Truth itself. Each tradition projects its shadow onto the other, intensifying polarization.

4.1. Shared Trajectory: Fear → Fixation → Ferocity

Both traditions follow the same psychological arc. With fear there is anxiety about identity, truth, or survival. In a state of fixation there tends to be an overemphasis on boundary markers as proxies for safety. With the culmination of ferocity each group each group assumes an aggressive defense of the tradition as a form of self-protection.

The patterns outlined above reveal that Catholic and Protestant extremes, though appearing opposite, often arise from the same underlying psychological distortions. The following table makes this mirroring effect explicit by placing the two traditions' confessional excesses side-by-side and identifying the shared root beneath each pair.

Table 4. Master Comparative Table of Confessional Extremes

Dimension	Catholic Extreme	Protestant Extreme	Shared Root (Distortion)
Authority	Authoritarianism: Surrender to the institution to avoid responsibility.	Hyper-Individualism: Surrender to	Fear of Ambiguity: A need for an infallible earthly "referee."

[96] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67. Volf uses the term "logic" to describe a patterned way of seeing, not a rational process. When fear governs the imagination, the mind constructs a coherent but fundamentally distorted narrative in which the other appears dangerous. This "logic" is illogical in any objective sense, although it may feel internally consistent to those experiencing threat. Fear in turn narrows perception, collapses complexity, and overrides shared bonds such as humanity or baptism and replaces them with a defensive interpretive frame that justifies exclusion. Thus, the so-called "logic of exclusion" is not so much a product of reason but rather that of fear-driven imagination. In sum, this preserves Volf's language while making it clear that the "logic" is a psychological mechanism and not a rational argument.

		personal interpretation to avoid accountability.	
Regulation	Legalism: Canon law as a substitute for discernment.	Doctrinal Rigidity: Confessions as a substitute for mystery.	Need for Control: Managing God through logic or law.
Boundary	Institutional Pride: Unity maintained by exclusion.	Purity Pride: Truth maintained by constant schism.	Fragile Identity: Self-worth tied to being "more right" than others.
Conflict Style	Aggressive Apologetics: Defending the fortress.	Polemical Sectarianism: Attacking the "apostate."	Defensiveness: Protecting the ego from perceived group-threat.
Evolution	Stagnation: Refusal to change due to "Tradition."	Alienation: Constant splintering due to "Authenticity."	Spiritual Immaturity: Inability to integrate or hold tension

As the table makes clear, the extremes of each tradition are not isolated pathologies but parallel distortions shaped by the same underlying fears and identity vulnerabilities. Recognizing this symmetry reframes confessional conflict not as a one-sided critique but as a shared invitation to self-examination and mutual understanding.

A Mirror and Not A Monologue

This shared trajectory reveals that confessional hostility is a mirror and not a monologue. Donald Winnicott argues that psychological maturity depends on a facilitating environment characterized as a relational space that provides enough safety for the self to feel held and enough challenge for it to grow. When this environment is absent or inconsistent, the individual often develops defensive structures that protect against anxiety but restrict genuine integration. In such cases, rigidity, idealization, and boundary-tightening function as substitutes for inner stability. Applied to confessional identity, Winnicott helps explain why some religious communities produce believers who cling to doctrinal absolutes or polemical certainty[97] for without a secure

[97] Polemical certainty in this context is a defensive mode of belief in which theological claims are treated as weapons for boundary-policing rather than as truths to be discerned, producing an attitude that interprets disagreement as threat and dialogue as capitulation.

relational and symbolic environment, faith becomes defensive rather than exploratory, externally reinforced rather than internally grounded.[98]

[98] Donald Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), 148. Winnicott was one of the most influential psychoanalysts of the twentieth century, especially in the fields of child development, trauma, and the psychology of the self. He was a British pediatrician and psychoanalyst whose work reshaped how clinicians understand emotional maturity, attachment, and the formation of a stable identity.

Part II - Trauma Theory and Confessional Rigidity

1. The Role of Collective Trauma

Trauma theory provides a crucial interpretive framework for understanding why confessional identities become rigid, reactive, and resistant to transformation. Trauma (whether collective or individual) reshapes the cognitive, emotional, and relational capacities of persons and communities.[99] In religious contexts, trauma does not remain confined to just a psychological experience in isolation, but rather it becomes encoded in doctrine, ritual, institutional memory, and group identity.[100] The TAPS methodology shows how trauma operates simultaneously on theological, anthropological, psychological, and sociological levels, which in turn produce patterns of confessional rigidity that are often misinterpreted as purely doctrinal disagreements.

Thus, trauma distorts theological reasoning by narrowing the imagination, reducing complexity, and privileging defensive interpretations of tradition, or simply put, because a dysregulated mind seeks safety rather than truth. When fear is activated, the psyche contracts demonstrating that complexity feels dangerous, ambiguity feels threatening, and nuance feels like a loss of control. In this constricted state, the imagination (which normally enables believers to hold paradox, entertain multiple interpretive possibilities, and perceive God's action with depth

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[99] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

[100] Jeffrey Alexander, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1. In Alexander's terms, trauma becomes cultural when a group interprets a painful event as a defining wound that must be remembered, narrated, and transmitted in order to preserve identity. In religious contexts, this encoding happens through several mutually reinforcing mechanisms. In short, doctrines harden around past threats, turning theological distinctions into protective boundaries, rituals embody and reenact communal wounds through commemorations, purity practices, or heightened liturgical precision, while institutional memory selectively preserves narratives of suffering, betrayal, or survival that frame how the community interprets new events. Furthermore, group identity organizes itself around vigilance, cohesion, and suspicion of outsiders, and by extension trauma moves from a psychological event to a formative cultural force, therefore shaping how a tradition thinks, worships, remembers, and defines itself.

and flexibility) shrinks into rigid binaries.[101] Theological questions become survival questions, doctrines become defensive walls, and the rich, spacious landscape of faith collapses into a tight grid of certainties designed to keep anxiety at bay. In an anthropological context, trauma reshapes ritual life and symbolic worlds, creating liturgical and cultural practices that reinforce vigilance rather than vulnerability. Trauma psychologically activates survival mechanisms such as the responses of fight, flight, freeze, or fawn that typically become embedded in confessional behavior. Trauma sociologically reorganizes group boundaries, heightens threat perception, and fosters narratives of chosenness or persecution.[102] In other words, sociological trauma reshapes how a group sees itself and others as it tightens boundaries to keep outsiders at a distance, makes the community more alert to possible threats, and encourages stories that portray the group as uniquely chosen or repeatedly targeted. In turn, these patterns help the group feel safer, even if they exaggerate danger or divide people more sharply than before.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for interpreting Catholic and Protestant hostility not as a breakdown of theological reasoning but as the outward expression of unhealed wounds that continue to shape how each tradition perceives threat, difference, and identity. When trauma (either individual or collective) remains unresolved, it embeds itself in the community's imagination, narrowing interpretive flexibility and heightening defensiveness. What appears on the surface as doctrinal conflict is often the psychological manifestation of fear, loss, and historical injury, that is carried forward through ritual, memory, and group identity. Recognizing this allows the hostility to be read with more empathy and understanding not as stubbornness or bad faith, but as a symptom of deeper pain that has yet to be acknowledged and healed.

1.1. Collective Trauma

Collective trauma refers to historically significant events that wound a community so deeply that the effects reverberate across generations.[103] These traumas become part of the group's

[101] Rigid binaries arise when trauma narrows the imagination to such a degree that complex theological or historical realities are reduced to stark either/or categories. Instead of engaging the richness, paradox, and developmental depth of the Christian tradition, the traumatized mind gravitates toward simplified oppositions (e.g., orthodox vs. heretical, faithful vs. compromised, pure vs. impure, us vs. them, etc.) because these binaries feel safer and more controllable than ambiguity. In this constricted state, nuance becomes threatening, difference becomes dangerous, and theological reasoning collapses into defensive categorization. Rigid binaries therefore function as psychological survival strategies rather than genuine doctrinal discernment, revealing how fear, not faith, often drives the shape of confessional judgment.

[102] Ron Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma," *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1, no. 1 (2013): 60.

[103] Ibid., 61.

"cultural DNA," shaping identity, memory, and behavior long after the original events have passed.[104] In confessional traditions, trauma is more than just something that is "remembered"; it is ritualized, theologized, and transmitted through catechesis, liturgy, and communal narratives.[105]

1.1.1. Catholic Collective Trauma

Catholic collective trauma is thus shaped by a series of historical ruptures that destabilized the Church's sense of identity, authority, and mission as noted in the following ways:

Loss of Cultural Dominance

For centuries, Catholicism functioned as the cultural and political center of Western civilization, however, the gradual erosion of this dominance (through the culminating forces of secularization, Enlightenment rationalism, and modern pluralism) in turn produced a profound sense of displacement.[106] Theologically speaking, this loss was interpreted as a crisis of fidelity or a sign of eschatological struggle while anthropologically it disrupted the symbolic universe that had structured Catholic life in the West for several centuries.[107] This shift created a persistent psychological anxiety within Catholicism about its relevance and legitimacy in that a tradition long accustomed to being the center of culture suddenly had to now justify its authority in a world no longer organized around its assumptions. When viewed sociologically the loss of cultural dominance weakened the Church's capacity to shape public morality and social norms as emerging

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[104] Alexander, *Cultural Trauma*, 8.

[105] Collective trauma is passed from one generation to the next not through genetics but through the stories, emotions, behaviors, and social structures that carry the memory of the wound forward. Even when children never experience the original event, they absorb its emotional atmosphere and interpretive frameworks through family life and communal belonging. Families transmit trauma through the narratives they tell, the fears they normalize, the rituals and commemorations they practice, and the relational patterns they model, while parents with unresolved wounds often communicate heightened vigilance, mistrust, or defensiveness that children internalize as part of their identity. Communities reinforce these patterns through shared stories of suffering, institutional memory, and boundary-keeping norms that frame the world in terms of past threats. Through the course of time, these emotional and cultural dynamics become part of the group's inherited worldview, allowing the trauma to continue shaping identity long after the original event has passed.

[106] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 437. In Taylor's terms, the Reformation contributed to the weakening of Catholic cultural dominance, *but it was not the primary cause*. It acted as an early catalyst that fractured a once-unified religious landscape, yet the deeper displacement of Catholic centrality resulted mainly from broader political and cultural forces such as secularization, Enlightenment rationalism, the rise of the modern state, and the emergence of pluralism which reshaped the very conditions of belief.

[107] In anthropological terms, a symbolic universe is the overarching system of meanings, rituals, symbols, stories, and social practices that a community uses to make sense of reality. It is the "world of meaning" people inhabit, i.e., a shared framework that tells them what is true, what is sacred, how life is ordered, and where they belong.

secular institutions, nation-states, and pluralistic frameworks increasingly displaced the Church as the primary arbiter of meaning, ethics, and social order.[108]

Reformation Fragmentation[109]

The Protestant Reformation inflicted a wound that remains central to Catholic identity for the fracturing of Western Christendom was experienced not as isolated doctrinal disagreement but as a rupture in the Church's visible unity.[110] The Reformation theologically challenged Catholic claims to universality by introducing rival interpretations of Scripture, authority, and sacrament that fractured what had long been assumed to be a single, unified Church. Anthropologically speaking it disrupted the shared ritual world that had structured Christian life in the West for centuries, thus replacing a common liturgical and sacramental rhythm with divergent practices that reshaped how various communities experienced the sacred. This rupture, psychologically, generated a defensive position toward dissent as both Catholics and Protestants came to view theological difference not as legitimate diversity but as a threat to each other's identity and stability. The split sociologically ushered in centuries of confessional competition between the two with each tradition building institutions, educational systems, and public identities in deliberate contrast to the other, embedding rivalry into the very fabric and culture of Western religious life.

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[108] Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Secular institutions that displaced Catholic cultural authority are discussed throughout Taylor's treatment of disembedding and the modern social imaginary (pp. 146–176), his analysis of the impersonal order of science, bureaucracy, and the market (pp. 221–299), and his account of the new public sphere and the age of mobilization (pp. 423–455). These sections together explain how the modern state, legal systems, public education, scientific rationality, economic structures, and print-public discourse gradually restructured Western society in ways that diminished the Church's ability to define meaning, morality, and social order.

[109] Catholic-Protestant persecution took a far more intense and violent form than Catholic-Orthodox conflict because the two ruptures were fundamentally different in tempo, psychology, and sociopolitical impact. The East-West Schism unfolded as a *slow, centuries-long estrangement rather than a sudden internal rebellion*, meaning Catholics never experienced the Orthodox as "runaways" from within their own house but as Christians of another empire and culture. The Orthodox rejection of papal authority was ancient rather than novel, and because they retained apostolic succession, sacramental validity, and a shared liturgical-sacramental ontology, Rome viewed them as a wounded sibling rather than a theological revolution. By contrast, the Protestant Reformation erupted rapidly inside the Western Church, producing immediate fragmentation, rival confessions, and mass defection from structures that had defined Western Christian identity for a millennium. This made Protestantism feel like betrayal rather than difference, triggering intense psychological boundary panic and institutional defensiveness. The Reformation was also deeply entangled with Western state formation, warfare, and political realignment, turning confessional identity into a matter of national survival in a way the Orthodox world never did. In addition, Protestants actively evangelized Catholic populations, whereas the Orthodox did not attempt mass conversion of the Latin West, making Protestantism a direct and destabilizing threat to social order of Catholicism. And, while the filioque dogma/doctrine controversy was serious, it never produced the civilizational, political, or cultural upheaval unleashed by the Reformation. Together, these factors explain why Catholic-Protestant hostility became so fierce while Catholic-Orthodox tensions, though real, never generated comparable patterns of persecution.

[110] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Viking, 2003), 102.

Anti-clerical Revolutions

From the French Revolution to 20th-century secularist movements, Catholic clergy and institutions have been targeted as symbols of oppression.[111] These events created a trauma narrative of persecution and betrayal.[112] The Church understood such attacks theologically as violations of the divinely ordained structure of society, and anthropologically they unsettled the long-standing social authority and everyday functions of clergy. Psychologically, these pressures cultivated a posture of hypervigilance[113] and defensiveness, while sociologically they pushed Catholic institutions toward retrenchment thus reinforcing wariness toward modern political and cultural developments.

Abuse Scandals

Massimo Faggioli observes that the global sexual abuse crisis constitutes one of the most significant contemporary traumas to Catholic identity thus functioning as a rupture that has reshaped the Church's internal self-understanding and its public credibility.[114] The crisis represents more than just a moral failure of individual clergy in that it represents a severe, systemic breakdown in communal candor, corporate contrition, and compassionate care (i.e., accountability, transparency, and corporate contrition). The betrayal of trust *by those entrusted with sacramental authority* (combined with decades of institutional minimization, secrecy, and defensive self-protection) generated a profound sense of shame, anger, and disillusionment among the faithful. This trauma psychologically destabilized the Catholic imagination by undermining the basic sense of safety that parishioners associate with *sacred* spaces, *serving* (pastoral) relationships, and the *sacramental* life. The very figures who symbolized divine mediation now

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[111] Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 55.

[112] For example: in the 1790s, revolutionary authorities dissolved monasteries, seized church property, and imprisoned or executed priests who refused loyalty to the state (France). In the 1870s, Bismarck's Kulturkampf cast the Church as an obstacle to national unity, resulting in the expulsion of religious orders and the imprisonment of resistant clergy. The French Third Republic intensified this pattern through school closures, the expulsion of teaching orders, and the 1905 separation laws that stripped the Church of public influence. Similar dynamics appeared in Mexico's post-revolutionary anticlerical campaigns and in the Spanish Civil War, where churches were burned and clergy were killed in Republican zones. Across these diverse contexts, Catholic institutions were treated not simply as religious bodies but as symbols of entrenched power, making them focal points for broader struggles over modernization, national identity, and state authority.

[113] Bessel van der Kolk defines hypervigilance as a trauma-conditioned state in which the nervous system remains locked in threat detection, causing individuals to interpret neutral or ambiguous stimuli as dangerous. See van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 67-72.

[114] Massimo Faggioli, *Catholicism and Citizenship* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017), 89.

became (for many) sources of threat, triggering patterns of hypervigilance, distrust, and spiritual disorientation. The crisis eroded sociological institutional legitimacy by exposing deep structural vulnerabilities within the Church's governance, revealing how *clericalism, cultural closure* (i.e., hierarchical insulation), and *corporate self-preservation* of *institutional character* over *individual care,* created conditions in which abuse could and did persist. This loss of legitimacy has had tumbling effects on *priestly* vocations, *parish* participation, *pecuniary* support, and the Church's *probity* (moral) authority in the *public* sphere. As a theologically perceived crisis it raised unsettling questions about holiness, authority, and the nature of the Church itself by asking: How can a community that proclaims itself the sacrament of Christ's presence harbor such profound failures? What does apostolic succession mean when those within the apostolic line perpetrate or conceal harm? How should Catholics understand the relationship between the Church's indefectibility (and perdurability)[115] and the manifest sinfulness of its leaders? These questions have forced both theologians and laypeople to wrestle with the tension between the Church as a divine-human mystery and the Church as a fallible historical institution. It is thus in this sense that the sexual abuse crisis functions as a contemporary form of collective trauma that resounds across the theological, anthropological, psychological, and sociological dimensions of Catholic life, and in turn reshapes not only how Catholics relate to their Church but also how the Church understands itself.[116]

[115] Indefectibility traditionally refers to the Church's divinely guaranteed preservation from ultimate failure in faith and mission, grounded in Christ's promise that the Church will not be overcome by error or destruction. Perdurability, while closely related, emphasizes the Church's enduring continuity across history despite the sinfulness, failures, and limitations of its members. It highlights the Church's persistence through time rather than an absolute immunity from corruption or scandal. See Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 208-12.

[116] The sexual-abuse crisis has also forced the Church to confront a deeper and more unsettling reality. The trauma does not simply alter how Catholics relate to the Church, but compels the Church to re-examine how it understands itself. This internal reckoning requires the Church to revisit its own theological self-descriptions (e.g., holiness, apostolicity, pastoral mission, moral authority, etc.) in light of the profound failures revealed by the crisis. It exposes structural vulnerabilities in governance, challenges long-standing assumptions about clerical identity, and disrupts the idealized narratives through which the Church has historically interpreted its own continuity and mission. In this sense, the crisis becomes a moment of ecclesial self-scrutiny, forcing the institution to acknowledge that its self-understanding cannot remain untouched by the realities of harm, secrecy, and systemic dysfunction. Therefore, the trauma not only reshapes the faithful's trust in the Church but also the Church's own theological and institutional consciousness, pressing it toward a more honest, humble, and accountable vision of itself.

1.1.2. How Trauma Shapes Catholic Institutional Memory

Result: Wounding → Withdrawing → Weaponizing. These traumas produce a predictable defensive triad:

Wounded Identity

Catholic identity thus becomes fragile, oscillating between triumphalism and insecurity.[117] The Church may emphasize its antiquity or universality not as a confident proclamation but as a compensatory mechanism. In other words, Sometimes the Church will highlight its long history or global reach not out of real confidence, but as a way of covering over its vulnerabilities or failures. In sum, this keeps the psychological insight intact in that what looks like strength can actually be a form of self-protection.

Withdrawal Into Hierarchy

Hierarchy, in turn, becomes a refuge and a means of re-establishing order and control in the face of chaos. In moments when the Church confronts profound disruption (e.g., whether doctrinal confusion, cultural upheaval, or the moral collapse revealed by the abuse crisis) the hierarchical structure can in turn function as a type of stabilizing anchor. Ratzinger suggests that hierarchy is not just an administrative arrangement but suggests more in a theological symbol of continuity and unity with its roots in apostolic tradition.[118] However, in contexts marked by trauma, this stabilizing function can take on an intensified psychological role in that hierarchy becomes highlighted as more of a protective shelter against the anxiety provoked by institutional failure. In other words, the appeal to authority, institutional lineage, and structure offers a feeling of certainty when the community's moral and spiritual foundations feel shaken. From a positive perspective, this seems to reflect a desire for coherence and fidelity; however, from a negative perspective, it can harden into defensiveness, over-centralization, or an avoidance of accountability. Thus hierarchy becomes both a genuine source of ecclesial order and at the same time a potential mechanism of self-protection (this can reveal how trauma can shape not only the faithful's relationship to authority but the Church's own reliance on hierarchical identity as a buffer against

[117] Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*, 12.
[118] Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 55.

disorder). In short, theologically authority is elevated as a bulwark against *cracking* (fragmentation); psychologically, it provides containment; and sociologically it *centralizes* power.

Weaponizing Authority

Magisterial authority is used not for discernment but misused for defense, thus turning doctrine into a shield against perceived threats. When the Church experiences internal instability or external criticism, the teaching office can shift from its proper role (i.e., guiding the faithful in truth through patient discernment) to a more reactive posture aimed at protecting institutional identity. Küng notes that in such moments doctrine becomes less a living expression of the Gospel and more a defensive barrier, deployed to silence questions, manage anxiety, and preserve existing structures.[119] This defensive use of authority reflects a trauma-conditioned instinct in that when the institution feels vulnerable it retreats into rigid formulations and authoritative declarations as a way of asserting control. And, so instead of fostering deeper understanding, magisterial statements can actually become instruments of boundary-policing, reinforcing an "us-versus-them" mentality and discouraging the very theological reflection they are meant to support. By this means the misuse of authority transforms doctrine from a resource for communal discernment into a protective mechanism that masks insecurity and inhibits genuine ecclesial renewal. In sum, this weaponization often manifests as legalism, rigidity, or punitive responses to dissent.

[119] Küng, *The Catholic Church*, 412.

2. Protestant Collective Trauma

Protestant collective trauma, on the other hand, emerges from a different set of historical pressures, each shaping the Protestant psyche in distinct ways.

Persecution

Early Protestants faced imprisonment, exile, and execution.[120] Early Protestants faced imprisonment, exile, and execution, revealing the extent to which the late-medieval Church (Catholic) interpreted dissent as a direct threat to its stability and authority. These punitive measures were not simply political tactics but expressions of a deeper ecclesial anxiety in that any theological disagreement was experienced as destabilizing (even dangerous) because it exposed unresolved tensions within the Church's own structures and self-understanding.[121] The severity of the response illustrates how institutional fear can transform doctrinal conflict into a matter of survival, prompting the Church to defend itself through coercive means rather than through discernment, dialogue, or reform.[122] This trauma produced a deep cultural memory of suffering for conscience's sake. Thus, theologically, persecution was framed as *fidelity* to Scripture.

[120] Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 233.

[121] The late-medieval (Catholic) Church carried a set of unresolved internal tensions that made any theological disagreement feel dangerously destabilizing. For example, its public claims to holiness and unity sat uneasily beside widespread corruption and pastoral failure, creating a deep insecurity about its own credibility. Authority was fragmented among popes, bishops, religious orders, and secular rulers, leaving the institution structurally fragile. Intellectual life was divided between scholastic elites and the devotional needs of ordinary believers, while long-standing calls for reform had gone largely unanswered. Financial power further clashed with the Church's spiritual ideals. In sum, since these tensions were never adequately addressed, even modest critiques threatened to expose the Church's vulnerabilities, prompting defensive and punitive reactions rather than genuine discernment.

[122] MacCulloch notes that early Protestant reformers across Europe routinely faced imprisonment, exile, and even execution as civil and ecclesiastical authorities sought to suppress what they perceived as destabilizing religious dissent. See *The Reformation*, 119-25.

Psychologically, it created *forethought* (i.e. vigilance) toward coercion and sociologically, a *fostering* of tight-knit communities defined by resistance.

Fear of Corruption

Protestant identity has long been shaped by the fear that institutions inevitably drift toward corruption. McGrath notes that the early Reformers viewed human sinfulness as something that could infiltrate even the most sacred of structures (the Church included), thus making vigilance and continual reform *essential* to the Christian life. This suspicion of institutional power quickly became a defining feature of Protestant self-understanding in that the Church must always be measured against Scripture, and its structures must remain open to critique lest they harden into the very abuses the Reformers sought to correct.[123] This fear is rooted in the Reformation narrative itself and reinforced by subsequent history. Thus, psychologically it produces suspicion; theologically, it elevates purity; and sociologically it encourages decentralization and fragmentation.

Denominational Fragmentation

The proliferation of denominations (which were often the result of some kind of conflict) has created a trauma of instability. The proliferation of denominations (many of which emerged out of conflict, schism, or doctrinal dispute) has created what Noll describes as a lingering trauma of instability. Each new split reinforced the sense that Protestant identity was marked by fragmentation, volatility, and the constant possibility of further division.[124] Not only did this pattern weaken institutional continuity but it also produced a psychological burden in that believers learned and came to expect rupture as a normal feature of ecclesial life. As a result the denominational landscape itself became a source of collective unease that shaped Protestant self-understanding through the memory of repeated conflict and the fear of ongoing fragmentation. In short, this fragmentation generates anxiety about authenticity and continuity while from an anthropological perspective it disrupts shared ritual life, psychologically it fosters insecurity and sociologically it normalizes *disruption* and *division*.

Anxiety About Authenticity

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[123] McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 89.
[124] Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 55.

Taylor observes that Protestantism's turn toward interiority created a spiritual environment in which believers feel responsible for *proving* (both to themselves and to their community) that their faith is authentic.[125] Because salvation is understood as an inward and personal transformation (rather than a sacramentally mediated reality per Catholic thought) the believer becomes the primary site of verification. This has the tendency to generate a distinctive moral-psychological burden in that now one must *show* that grace is operative through visible signs of sincerity, moral change, and affective/emotional intensity.

This emerges from the Reformation's theological emphasis on *fides viva* (living faith) as evidence of one's justification and anthropologically Protestant communities tend to reinforce this expectation through practices such as testimony, accountability structures, and conversion narratives, which in turn all function as cultural markers of authenticity. The inward focus from a psychological standpoint can produce a heightened self-scrutiny, furthering anxiety about spiritual adequacy or acceptance, and a tendency to monitor one's emotions and behavior as indicators of salvation. Sociologically, communal norms often amplify these pressures, creating environments where believers feel evaluated (either explicitly or implicitly) on the credibility of their spiritual experience.

Taylor's insight helps show that Protestant rigidity often has less to do with specific doctrines and more to do with the pressure many Protestants feel to *prove* that their faith is real. When someone believes that their spiritual authenticity depends on what is happening inside their heart, any uncertainty can thus feel threatening. As a response, some believers may tighten their boundaries, become more dogmatic, or grow suspicious of Christians who express their faith differently. This tends to lead to various degrees of rigidity that become a kind of self-protection, that is, a way to steady one's inner life that feels constantly on trial and therefore in constant need of validation.

2.1. How Trauma Shapes Protestant Institutional Memory

Result: Wounding → Withdrawing → Weaponizing (in a different key). The same trauma triad manifests differently:

Wounded Conscience

[125] Taylor, *Sources of the Self* , 507.

Instead of institutional identity, the Protestant wound centers on the conscience-its vulnerability to error or coercion. Volf's insight clarifies that, for many Protestants, the deepest point of vulnerability is not the loss of institutional identity but the fear that one's conscience may be mistaken, manipulated, or coerced. [126] In other words, when the conscience becomes the primary seat of religious authority, it also becomes the primary site of fear. Since faith must be inwardly chosen, inwardly verified, and inwardly maintained, Protestants often feel exposed to the possibility of getting it wrong or being pressured into beliefs that violate their deepest convictions. This makes the conscience both precious and precarious, and therefore a place to be fiercely protected. As a result, challenges to one's beliefs can feel like threats not just to doctrine but to the very integrity of the self, which helps explain why Protestant defensiveness often takes the form of guarding the conscience with heightened vigilance and rigidity.[127]

Withdrawal Into Doctrinal Purity

Here an unhealthy purity becomes a refuge, that is, a way to guarantee authenticity and avoid corruption. Although van der Kolk is not writing about theology per se, nevertheless, his point is that when people feel overwhelmed, unsafe, or unable to manage their inner world, they often retreat into rigid forms of order because these structures feel predictable and protective. Trauma makes ambiguity threatening, so therefore the mind gravitates toward anything that promises clarity, control, or purity. In this sense, "withdrawal into doctrinal purity" is simply a religious expression of a broader trauma pattern which is that the person uses strict rules, sharp boundaries, and uncompromising categories as a psychological refuge. The purity itself is not the problem in this case, but rather the function it serves is. It thus becomes a way to guarantee one's authenticity, avoid contamination (whether emotional, moral, or spiritual) and shield oneself from the vulnerability of open, relational engagement. In short, van der Kolk is describing how trauma

[126] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67.

[127] Protestant theology is not unique in teaching that faith involves the heart, but it is distinctive in placing the weight of *assurance* on the believer's inward experience. In broader Christian tradition, faith is nurtured and confirmed through the Church's sacramental and communal life (not only in Catholic tradition, but also other non-Catholic and Protestant traditions) which externalizes much of the burden of verification. However, in many Protestant settings the believer must personally confirm that their faith is genuine, sincere, and spiritually "alive," which can create a heightened sense of vulnerability around the conscience. This inward pressure (rather than doctrine alone) helps explain why Protestant identity *can* become rigid as believers guard the inner space where their spiritual legitimacy feels most at risk.

drives people toward rigid systems because rigidity feels safer than the unpredictable work of trust, nuance, or connection. [128]

Weaponizing Scripture

Scripture becomes a tool for boundary-policing rather than spiritual nourishment, reinforcing the R.I.G.I.D. pattern. Thus, when Scripture is used this way, it stops functioning as a source of wisdom, comfort, or guidance and instead becomes a weapon for drawing sharp lines between "us" and "them." Beck explains that when people feel threatened or insecure, they often cling to rigid categories and use moral or ideological rules to protect themselves. [129] Played out in a religious setting, this means the Bible can be turned into a tool for judging others, proving one's own correctness, or defending group boundaries. Thus, what should be a source of helping people grow spiritually instead becomes a way to stay safe by staying certain, i.e., reinforcing the very rigidity, defensiveness, and group-threat responses captured in the R.I.G.I.D. pattern.

As these dynamics accumulate, a recognizable pattern emerges: trauma shapes institutional memory in ways that generate predictable emotional reflexes and defensive strategies across both traditions. Although the specific wounds may differ, nevertheless the underlying trajectory (i.e., moving from wounding to withdrawal to weaponizing) remains remarkably consistent. To consolidate this pattern and make the parallels more visible at a glance, the following table summarizes the core trauma-response dynamics shared by Catholic and Protestant communities.

Table 5. Trauma-Response Mapping

Trauma Category	Catholic Expression	Protestant Expression
Collective Trauma	Loss of dominance, fragmentation/splits, scandal	Persecution, corruption anxiety, fragmentation
Emotional Reflex	Fear of chaos	Fear of control
Defensive Strategy	Tighten hierarchy and authority	Tighten doctrinal boundaries

[128] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 31.
[129] Beck, *Prisoners of Hate*, 44.

Trauma Triad	Wounding → Withdrawing → Weaponizing	Wounding → Withdrawing → Weaponizing

The shared trauma-response patterns outlined above do not remain confined to institutions or collective memory, they also shape the lived experience of individuals within each tradition. When Catholics and Protestants internalize these inherited wounds, the result is a set of personal reflexes that mirror the broader communal dynamics. These reflexes often follow the classic trauma sequence of fight, flight, freeze, and fawn that surface whenever a person's religious identity feels threatened, destabilized, or overwhelmed. By examining these responses at the individual level, we can see how confessional rigidity is not simply a structural or doctrinal phenomenon but a deeply embodied psychological one. The following section explores each of these trauma responses in turn, tracing how they manifest across both traditions.

2.2. Individual Trauma Responses in Religious Identity (Both Catholic and Protestant)

2.2.1. Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Fawn

Trauma theory identifies four primary survival responses (fight, flight, freeze, and fawn) and each of these can be seen in how both individuals and communities adopt rigid confessional postures.[130] These responses are the body's automatic strategies for staying safe when it perceives danger and when translated into the realm of religious identity, they become theological styles rather than just emotional reactions. *Fight* appears as aggressive boundary-policing, arguments and speeches, or the need to "defend the truth" at all costs. *Flight* shows up as withdrawal from open and respectful dialogue, avoidance of theological complexity, or a retreat into closed interpretive communities (insular subcultures). *Freeze* manifests as intellectual paralysis, rigid literalism, or the inability to tolerate ambiguity without feeling threatened. *Fawn* emerges as over-compliance with authority, idealization of one's tradition, or uncritical repetition of inherited formulas in order to maintain relational safety.[131] In each case, the theological posture is not

[130] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 21-24.

[131] Pete Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving* (Walnut Creek, CA: Azure Coyote, 2013), 28-35. The *fawn* response, as articulated in trauma theory and developed most explicitly by Pete Walker, describes a survival strategy in which individuals manage fear by securing safety through compliance, appeasement, and idealization rather than through resistance or withdrawal. In this mode, the nervous system interprets relational tension

primarily about doctrine itself but about the psyche's attempt to manage fear, preserve belonging, and maintain a sense of internal stability when identity feels vulnerable.

Fight: Polemics and Apologetic Aggression

Individuals in fight mode respond to perceived threats with "intellectual" combat. Theologically, this manifests as *aggressive* apologetics in which doctrinal defense becomes a vehicle for asserting control and warding off perceived threats.[132] It psychologically reflects a state of hyperarousal in which the traumatized nervous system remains primed for danger and therefore reacts with heightened vigilance, reactivity, and rigidity. From a sociological perspective it fuels escalating conflict cycles as communities caught in collective hyperarousal interpret disagreement as hostility, thus reinforcing their boundary-tightening norms, and continue to transmit patterns of suspicion and antagonism across generations.[133] In short, fight responses often masquerade as zeal for truth but are rooted in fear of vulnerability.

Flight: Sectarian Withdrawal

Flight manifests as retreat into enclaves or separatist communities. From a theological point individuals and groups tend to frame this as "faithfulness" recasting withdrawal as a principled stand for purity or doctrinal integrity rather than as an avoidance of complexity or a perceived threat to the self or the group. Within the science of anthropology it creates insular cultures because

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as a threat to belonging, prompting the person to align themselves (often unconsciously) with the authority figure, community, or tradition perceived as capable of providing protection. Applied to confessional identity, fawning produces theological postures marked by over-compliance with ecclesial authority, uncritical repetition of inherited formulas, and idealization of one's tradition as flawless or beyond question. These behaviors are not primarily expressions of doctrinal conviction but of attachment insecurity: the believer maintains harmony not because the system is intellectually compelling but because dissent feels dangerous, conflict feels destabilizing, and belonging feels contingent upon agreement. Thus, what appears externally as piety, loyalty, or orthodoxy may in fact be a trauma-shaped strategy for preserving relational safety. In this sense, fawning reveals how unresolved fear can transform theological commitments into mechanisms of self-protection, where the primary aim is not truth but the maintenance of connection, stability, and identity coherence within the confessional group.

[132] A trauma-driven *fight* response produces a form of apologetics that is fundamentally different from the healthy apologetics envisioned in 1 Peter 3:15. Individuals in fight mode respond to perceived threats with "intellectual" combat, using doctrinal argumentation not as a means of witness or discernment but as a defensive weapon to reassert control and neutralize anxiety. In contrast, the apostolic call to "give a reason for the hope that is in you" is framed explicitly by gentleness, reverence, and a non-defensive posture rooted in secure attachment to Christ. Healthy apologetics arises from spiritual stability rather than fear, it seeks understanding rather than victory, and it engages difference without interpreting disagreement as danger. The distinction I make here is not just a rhetorical one, but psychological, i.e., that trauma-shaped apologetics is driven by hyperarousal and the need to protect a fragile self, whereas mature apologetics flows from a grounded identity capable of hospitality, patience, and genuine dialogue.

[133] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 86.

withdrawal reshapes a community's rituals, symbols, and shared stories around protection rather than engagement. Practices become inward-focused, symbols function as boundary markers, and communal memory narrows to reinforce separation, and in turn produces a cultural world oriented toward safety through isolation rather than openness. From the psychologic point it avoids vulnerability by treating distance as protection and reducing exposure to disagreement or complexity that might unsettle a fragile sense of self. And, finally from a sociological point it accelerates fragmentation as groups withdraw into smaller, self-reinforcing circles, thus weakening shared structures and multiplying divisions across the broader religious landscape.[134] In sum, flight responses often produce purity enclaves that reinforce trauma rather than heal it.

Freeze: Rigid Literalism

A freeze response typically produces rigidity, that is, an inability to tolerate ambiguity and from a theological mindset this becomes literalism or legalism, as unyielding interpretations (literalism) and fixed rules (legalism) feel safer than open-ended discernment.[135] It also psychologically reflects dissociation, a numbing or narrowing of awareness that reduces emotional overwhelm by shutting down flexibility. In the view of sociology, it leads to inflexible institutions as communities mirror this rigidity in their structures, policies, and norms, prioritizing stability over adaptation and treating change as a threat rather than an opportunity for growth.[136] In summary, freeze responses often appear as "orthodoxy" but are actually fear-based attempts to halt change.

Fawn: Uncritical Submission

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[134] Capps, *The Depleted Self* , 102.

[135] By contrast, healthy adherence to doctrine reflects a secure and reflective faith that can affirm the Church's teachings without collapsing into defensive absolutism. It allows for nuance, historical development, and the legitimate complexity of theological reasoning because truth is experienced as a source of freedom rather than a shield against anxiety. In this sense, the difference is not the presence of conviction but the posture from which conviction is held i.e., mature adherence arises from confidence and communion, while freeze-based rigidity arises from fear and the need to control uncertainty. Also, when I talk about *defensive absolutism* I am referring to the use of rigid, totalizing theological claims *not because truth demands them, but because the self does*. It is conviction fused with fear, i.e., a posture in which certainty becomes a psychological refuge, nuance feels dangerous, and doctrine functions as protection against vulnerability or perceived threat. In essence, it is absolutism rooted in insecurity rather than insight, a defensive strategy that shields a fragile identity rather than expressing mature faith.

[136] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 89.

Fawn responses manifest as deference to authority or group norms, a dynamic that Jung describes as the ego's collapse into the collective in order to avoid the anxiety of individuation.[137] Thus, theologically this may appears as clericalism or leader-worship, in which the believer idealizes ecclesial authority (in general, or onto a specific person) and projects strength, purity, or certainty onto leaders as a way of avoiding the inner conflict and responsibility that genuine discernment requires. Fawning often functions like a form of transference (not in the strict clinical sense, but in the broader psychological sense Jung and later relational theorists describe) in which the believer unconsciously projects their own need for strength, certainty, or protection onto a leader or tradition and then relates to that authority as if it actually possesses those idealized qualities. Instead of engaging in genuine discernment, the person hands over their agency to avoid the vulnerability and inner conflict that come with thinking for oneself. Thus, clericalism or leader-worship becomes less about the leader's real character and more about the believer's psychological need to feel safe by attaching to a figure who seems capable of carrying the weight of their fears and unresolved longings.[138] Examining more through the psychological lens it reflects fear of abandonment and the longing for protection, prompting individuals to suppress their own judgments, desires, or doubts in exchange for the perceived safety of unquestioned loyalty. Finally, from the point of sociology it enables abuse of power because communities shaped by fawning become structurally predisposed to overlook misconduct, excuse authoritarian behavior, and equate dissent with betrayal, thereby creating an environment in which leaders are insulated from accountability and the group's shadow remains unexamined.[139] In sum, fawn responses create distorted environments where dissent is pathologized and conformity is spiritualized.

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[137] Jung, *Aion*, 92. When someone "fawns," they give up their own voice, judgment, or individuality in order to blend into the group or please an authority figure. Jung calls this "the ego's collapse into the collective" because the person stops standing on their own psychological feet. Instead of becoming a distinct, responsible self (what he calls *individuation*), they melt into the group to avoid the stress, conflict, or inner work that comes with being their own person. In short, the idea is that fawning is a way of staying safe by disappearing into the group, letting the collective think and choose for you so you do not have to face the anxiety of making your own judgments or risking disapproval.

[138] Ibid., 92.

[139] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 74-95. Herman notes that trauma often produces patterns of compliance rooted in fear of abandonment and a longing for safety, which can lead individuals to silence their own perceptions in order to maintain attachment. She also observes that such dynamics, when embedded in groups, create conditions in which authority goes unchecked and abuse becomes normalized.

2.2.2. Rational and Emotional Brain Distinction

Bessel van der Kolk's work provides one of the clearest neuroscientific explanations for why trauma produces rigidity, hypervigilance, and defensive postures, the same patterns that map directly onto the confessional behaviors analyzed in this paper. Van der Kolk argues that traumatic experience disrupts the integration between what he calls the "rational brain" (the prefrontal cortex, responsible for reflection, interpretation, and executive control) and the "emotional brain" (the limbic system, especially the amygdala, responsible for threat detection, emotional memory, and survival responses) so that when trauma is activated, the emotional brain overwhelms the rational brain, effectively "hijacking" cognitive processes and narrowing the individual's capacity for nuance, curiosity, or flexible interpretation.[140]

In van der Kolk's terms, trauma shifts the nervous system into a survival-dominant mode where the emotional brain operates as if danger is present *even when the threat is symbolic, historical, or imagined*.[141] This neurobiological dynamic is crucial for understanding confessional rigidity in that when individuals or communities perceive theological difference as a threat (whether to identity, continuity, or belonging) the emotional brain interprets that difference as danger. The result ends up being a predictable constriction of cognitive and relational capacities. In other words, the rational brain's ability to evaluate, discern, or interpret charitably becomes compromised and the emotional brain defaults to fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses.

As van der Kolk notes, this is why traumatized systems "react" rather than "reflect."[142] Confessional hostility often emerges not from doctrinal conviction but from a limbic-driven survival reflex since the emotional brain does not distinguish between physical threat and symbolic threat, it just simply registers danger. Thus, a theological disagreement, a liturgical change, or an ecumenical encounter can trigger the same neurobiological circuitry that responds to physical danger. The manifested result is seen in rigidity, boundary fortification, and identity defensiveness which are the very patterns captured in the R.I.G.I.D. schema (Reactivity, Identity fusion, Group threat, Insecurity, Defensiveness).

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[140] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 47-53.
[141] Ibid., 60-67.
[142] Ibid., 31-32.

2.2.3. How Each Maps Onto Confessional Rigidity and Why Rigidity Feels Like Safety

Trauma research further clarifies why confessional identity becomes rigid under perceived threat as trauma often drives individuals into narrowed, inflexible relational and emotional patterns (i.e., survival-oriented postures that restrict perception and behavior in the service of maintaining a felt sense of safety).[143] These trauma-mediated patterns map directly onto confessional defensiveness showing that when identity is threatened, believers tend to default to survival-based responses rather than reflective discernment. It is therefore in this sense that confessional rigidity functions less as a theological conclusion and more as a trauma-shaped coping mechanism.[144]

Trauma-informed clinicians emphasize that trauma reshapes not only emotional responses but also relational expectations and identity structures. A large body of trauma research confirms that traumatic experience generates enduring patterns of relational constriction and defensive adaptation. Bessel van der Kolk argues that trauma reorganizes the brain's threat-detection systems in ways that produce "persistent survival-oriented behaviors" long after the original danger has passed.[145] Likewise Judith Herman notes that traumatized individuals and communities often adopt "rigid patterns of control and vigilance" as a means of maintaining psychic safety in the face of perceived instability.[146] Bruce Perry's neurodevelopmental work further demonstrates that chronic stress conditions groups to rely on protective postures that are adaptive in moments of threat but become maladaptive when generalized to ordinary social life.[147] Peter Levine similarly observes that unresolved trauma leads to "defensive bracing" in both individuals and systems, a posture that functions less as ideology and more as a survival strategy. In his books *Waking the Tiger* and *In an Unspoken Voice*, he gives the examples of individuals whose bodies remain chronically tensed-muscles tightened, breath shallow, posture rigid as if danger were still present long after the threat

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[143] Ibid., 62-63.

[144] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 34-45. Herman again notes that trauma often narrows perception and constricts the capacity for reflective judgment, leading individuals to rely on automatic survival responses when identity feels threatened. These patterns, when carried into communal or ideological life, produce defensive rigidity that functions more as a coping strategy than as a considered conviction.

[145] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 53-54.

[146] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 62.

[147] Bruce D. Perry and Maia Szalavitz, *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 29-31. Perry's work shows that the brain adapts to whatever environment *it repeatedly encounters*. When stress or threat is chronic, the nervous system becomes trained to stay on alert, relying on protective reactions (such as fight, flight, freeze, or fawn) as its default mode. In acute danger, these responses are lifesaving, yet (as Perry explains) when they become habitual, they shape behavior even in safe, everyday situations. When applied to groups, this means communities can become organized around vigilance, defensiveness, or compliance, carrying survival-based *patterns into normal social or religious life where they no longer fit and ultimately become harmful.*

has passed. He extends this pattern to relationships and institutions as well: families that become rule-bound and hyper-controlled to prevent imagined harm, or organizations that respond to conflict by tightening hierarchy, increasing surveillance, and enforcing conformity. For Levine, these are all expressions of the same survival reflex: physiological bracing scaled up into interpersonal and systemic behavior.[148]/[149] Thus these combined insights help to clarify why religious communities under strain may default to confessional rigidity in that the defensive posture is not primarily doctrinal but developmental, shaped by trauma-mediated patterns of vigilance, boundary-tightening, and self-protection. When properly applied to confessional identity, these insights clarify why Catholic and Protestant communities may respond to theological difference with disproportionate defensiveness. In this sense, the reaction is less doctrinal than developmental, being rooted in trauma-shaped patterns of vigilance and self-protection.

In summary, these responses reinforce the R.I.G.I.D. pattern (Reactivity, Identity fusion, Group threat, Insecurity, Defensiveness), creating what might be called theological fortresses, that is, structures designed to protect the self rather than pursue truth.[150]

[148] Peter A. Levine, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1997), 34-41. Levine describes "defensive bracing" as the chronic muscular tension, guarded posture, and persistent vigilance that remain long after a threat has passed, noting that these same survival patterns can appear in families and institutions as rigid rules, over-control, and hyper-vigilant structures.

[149] Peter A. Levine, *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 57-63. Levine further illustrates how unresolved trauma shapes both individual behavior and group dynamics, showing that systems under chronic stress adopt protective rigidity (e.g., tightened hierarchy, reduced flexibility, and defensive control) as a scaled-up version of the body's own bracing response

[150] Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, 255.

3. Shadow Projection Between Traditions

3.1. How Each Tradition Embodies the Other's Shadow

Shadow projection occurs when individuals or communities attribute their own disowned fears or flaws to others. So, when we use the term "shadow projection" we are referring to the process of attributing to others the traits, impulses, or vulnerabilities a person cannot acknowledge in themselves. Therefore, instead of recognizing these disowned parts as their own, the individual "sees" them in someone else (often with exaggerated intensity). In Jung's terms, it is the externalization of the rejected aspects of the self, turning inner conflict into outward judgment or idealization.[151] In confessional contexts, Catholics and Protestants project onto each other the very vulnerabilities they cannot acknowledge within themselves. This dynamic is captured by the triad Superiority → Separation → Stagnation.

Superiority: "We alone preserve the truth"

Superiority is a compensatory mechanism that masks insecurity, a dynamic René Girard identifies in the way communities construct distinctions that elevate the in-group while concealing underlying vulnerability.[152] Viewed through a theological lens, this surfaces as triumphalism, where claims of spiritual or doctrinal supremacy function less as genuine confidence and more as a shield against doubt or fragility. Psychologically speaking it protects the ego by projecting strength outward to avoid confronting internal fear or inadequacy while sociologically it reinforces group cohesion by uniting members around a shared sense of elevated identity (often at the expense of those cast as outsiders or inferiors). Thus, superiority narratives often emerge precisely where identity is most fragile.

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[151] Jung, *Aion*, 92.
[152] Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 12.

Separation: Withdrawal From Dialogue

Separation emerges when engagement feels threatening. It is justified theologically as "guarding the faith" while anthropologically it creates cultural silos. From the angle of psychology it avoids discomfort. Within a sociological framework it entrenches division, a pattern Erving Goffman notes in his analysis of how groups manage interaction by withdrawing from situations that might unsettle their preferred identities or expose them to loss of face.[153] In short, separation is the social expression of internal fragmentation.

Stagnation: Spiritual Immaturity

Stagnation results when communities refuse to grow, learn, or repent. Analyzed through the lens of theology, this stagnation halts theological development and psychologically it reflects fear. From the perspective of sociology it perpetuates dysfunction (a pattern Donald Winnicott notes when describing how systems that cannot tolerate anxiety or change become rigid, defensive, and unable to mature).[154] Stagnation is the inevitable outcome of unhealed trauma.

3.2. Projection and Fear: Catholics Fearing Protestants; Protestants Fearing Catholics

Shadow projection ensures that each tradition fears in the other what it fears in itself. In this case, Catholics fear Protestant fragmentation or group splintering because they fear their own internal fractures while Protestants fear Catholic authoritarianism because they fear their own susceptibility to coercion. Tajfel's social-identity theory clarifies why this reciprocal pattern is structurally predictable rather than accidental. Groups maintain coherence by accentuating differences with outsiders while minimizing internal tensions, especially when they perceive themselves as vulnerable.[155] In such conditions, the "other" becomes a symbolic container for disowned anxieties, therefore stabilizing identity by externalizing internal threat.

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[153] Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 23.

[154] Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes*, 148. Winnicott's insight helps clarify why people (and the religious communities they form) can become rigid when they cannot tolerate anxiety or change. For Winnicott, healthy development requires enough safety for a person or group to face uncertainty without collapsing into defensiveness. When that capacity is missing, the system organizes around avoiding discomfort rather than pursuing growth, leading to patterns of rigidity, repetition, and emotional immaturity. This dynamic is especially visible in individuals who use religion to mask unresolved trauma. Doctrines become protective walls rather than pathways to transformation, certainty becomes a shield against inner chaos, and resistance to change reflects not theological conviction but the fear that any disruption might expose unprocessed pain. In this sense, religious rigidity often mirrors the traumatized psyche itself structured around survival rather than healthy maturation.

[155] Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, 255.

For Catholics, the Protestant multiplicity in the way of *denominational circulation* (proliferation), *doctrinal complexity* (diversity), and *democratic choice* (congregational autonomy), functions as a mirror of Catholicism's own latent fractures such as post-Vatican II liturgical conflict, tensions between traditionalist and progressive movements, and regional theological divergence. Because Catholic identity is theologically tied to unity and apostolic continuity, any internal division is interpreted and experienced not simply as disagreement but as a wound in the Body of Christ. Projecting this anxiety onto Protestantism allows Catholics to preserve an idealized image of ecclesial stability.[156]

For Protestants, Catholic authority becomes the embodiment of a danger they recognize within their own tradition, that is, the vulnerability of one's conscience to *controlling* (manipulation), the risk of *commanding* (authoritarian) pastors or sectarian leaders, and the historical memory of *coercive* revivalist or fundamentalist movements. Since Protestant identity typically depends on freedom, Scripture, and individual responsibility, the Catholic hierarchy thus becomes a symbolic representation of the very coercion Protestants fear in themselves.[157]

Therefore, shadow projection operates as a psychological defense mechanism that transforms internal contradictions into external threats.[158] Tajfel's insight that intergroup comparison is essential for positive social identity explains why these projections persist even when theological literacy is low.[159] In short, Catholics need Protestants to appear fragmented so Catholic unity feels secure while Protestants need Catholics to appear authoritarian so Protestant freedom feels intact.

This also helps to explain the emotional intensity of ecumenical encounters between the two. When the projected shadow is contradicted (e.g., when Catholics meet Protestants who are cohesive and disciplined, or Protestants meet Catholics who are dialogical and non-coercive) the

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[156] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67.

[157] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 513.

[158] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 89.

[159] Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, 255. Shadow projection is a psychological process in which people take the parts of themselves they find confusing, uncomfortable, or contradictory and mentally "push" them onto another group. Instead of dealing with these tensions internally, the mind relocates them outside the self, making another community appear dangerous or untrustworthy. This helps explain why religious groups sometimes see each other as threats even when the actual disagreements are small or poorly understood. Social psychologist Henri Tajfel showed that people rely on comparing their own group to others in order to feel good about who they are. Because this comparison is so central to maintaining a positive sense of identity, projected fears and suspicions can persist even when individuals have only a limited grasp of the theological issues involved. In other words, the conflict continues not because people deeply understand the doctrines, but because *the psychological need to protect the group's identity* keeps the projections alive.

disruption is existential.[160] The other becomes a mirror rather than an enemy, exposing unintegrated aspects of one's own tradition.[161]

Patristic theology reinforces this dynamic because early Christian writers recognized that much of what drives human behavior lies beneath conscious awareness. Augustine's account of *disordered desire* teaches that the human heart often reaches outward for control, certainty, or affirmation because it is unsettled within itself. Instead of confronting its own wounds or contradictions, the soul[162] attaches itself to external objects (e.g., power, status, the need to be right, etc.) as a way of soothing deeper insecurities.[163] In Augustine's view, desire becomes "disordered" not simply when it seeks the wrong things, but when it seeks them for the wrong reasons, i.e., to avoid facing the inner restlessness that only God can heal.[164]

Gregory the Great makes a parallel point about fear when he argues that when fear is not examined or acknowledged, it does not disappear, but instead it migrates.[165] Unaddressed fear looks for something outside the self to cling to, because directing it inward would require vulnerability and self-knowledge. Thus, fear often fastens onto external groups, imagined enemies,

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[160] Why encounters between Catholics and Protestants can feel surprisingly emotional or tense. When someone has been carrying around a "shadow image" of the other group (i.e., an internal picture shaped more by fear, rumor, or past wounds than by real experience) they come to expect certain behaviors. Catholics may assume Protestants are fragmented or undisciplined while Protestants may assume Catholics are rigid or controlling. These expectations feel like part of the world's basic structure, almost like "how things are." So when real people contradict those expectations (e.g., when Catholics meet Protestants who are united, thoughtful, and orderly, or when Protestants meet Catholics who are open, dialogical, and not coercive) the experience can be jarring. It is not just that the stereotype is wrong, it is that the person's internal map of reality suddenly doesn't match what's in front of them. That mismatch creates a kind of existential shock. The mind has to decide whether to update its picture of the world or to defend the old one more fiercely. Because identity is tied up in these shadow projections, the moment of contradiction can feel threatening, destabilizing, or even disorienting. In short, the emotional intensity comes from the fact that what is being challenged is not just an opinion about the other group but a deeper sense of who "we" are and how "they" fit into our story.

[161] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 121.

[162] In patristic theology, the "soul" refers to the immaterial, rational, and life giving principle of the human person, created by God and ordered toward communion with him. It is the seat of intellect, will, and desire, the locus of moral agency, and the interior space where the human person encounters truth, grace, and transformation. Thus, the patristic concept of the soul aligns closely with several core insights in modern psychology, even though the two traditions use different vocabularies. For Augustine, Bernard, and other early fathers, the soul is the immaterial and rational center of the person, the place where memory, desire, and will are shaped and where healing and integration occur. Contemporary psychology describes similar functions through constructs such as identity formation, executive functioning, affect regulation, and attachment. What the fathers call the "ordering" or "healing" of the soul parallels what psychology identifies as the integration of cognition, emotion, and relational patterns. Thus, while the metaphysical assumptions differ, the patristic understanding of the soul as the interior locus of meaning, desire, and transformation corresponds closely to modern accounts of the self as a dynamic, relational, and psychologically integrated whole.

[163] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 33-35.

[164] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 9-12.

[165] Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, trans. John Henry Parker (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844), 1:45-47.

or exaggerated threats and Gregory describes this as the soul's tendency to "flee from itself," projecting its anxieties outward so it does not have to confront its own fragility.[166]

Together, Augustine and Gregory describe a pattern that modern psychology would recognize immediately: when people do not face their inner wounds, those wounds seek expression elsewhere. The heart externalizes what it cannot bear internally. This is why religious communities may fixate on perceived threats outside themselves-because doing so feels safer than confronting the unresolved fears, contradictions, or desires within. Patristic theology therefore anticipates the modern concept of projection by showing that unhealed interior life inevitably shapes how we perceive and treat others.

From anthropology we recognize that every community uses rituals and symbols to say "this is who we are" and they often do that by contrasting themselves with others. When people or groups carry unhealed wounds or insecurities, psychology shows that they tend to project those fears outward onto an external "threat." Sociology then explains how communities build boundaries, rules, and traditions that keep these fears in place over time. In other words, together it means that inner wounds do not stay private. They shape how groups define themselves, how they treat outsiders, and how those patterns get passed down.[167]

Therefore, shadow projection is not just some kind of a marginal phenomenon but a structural feature of confessional identity under perceived threat. Recognizing it reframes confessional hostility as a displaced struggle with one's own vulnerabilities and opens the possibility for healing through self-examination rather than polemical discourse and argumentative defensiveness.[168]

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[166] Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Rule*, trans. George E. Demacopoulos (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 67-69.

[167] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 59.

[168] Capps, *The Depleted Self*, 102.

Table 6. Shadow Projection Between Traditions

Catholic Projection (Onto Protestant)	Protestant Projection (Onto Catholic)
"Protestants are chaotic/fragmented."	"Catholics are controlling/coercive."
Fear: Losing unity and order.	Fear: Losing autonomy and truth.
Process: Projection → Polarization → Paranoia	Process: Projection → Polarization → Paranoia
Shadow: Projects fear of internal disunity.	Shadow: Projects fear of internal authoritarianism.

4. The ARC Trauma Model and Confessional Identity

Developed by Blaustein and Kinniburgh The ARC trauma model (*Attachment, Regulation, Competency*) offers a clinically grounded framework for understanding how trauma shapes confessional identity and contributes to rigidity within Catholic and Protestant traditions.[169] When integrated into the TAPS methodology, ARC *reveals how trauma distorts* theological imagination, ritual belonging, emotional processing, and communal functioning. It provides a developmental grammar[170] for interpreting why confessional groups respond to perceived threats with defensiveness, absolutism, and polemical aggression.

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[169] Margaret E. Blaustein and Kristine M. Kinniburgh, *Treating Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents: How to Foster Resilience through Attachment, Self-Regulation, and Competency* (New York: Guilford Press, 2010), 3-12, 27. The Attachment, Regulation, and Competency (ARC) framework has emerged as one of the most influential evidence-based, trauma-informed intervention models for children and adolescents who have experienced chronic adversity. Developed by Kristine Kinniburgh and Margaret Blaustein at the Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute, ARC is grounded in research demonstrating that complex trauma disrupts relational security, emotional regulation, and developmental mastery (three domains essential for healthy functioning across the lifespan). By prioritizing caregiver attunement, co-regulation, and the gradual strengthening of executive functioning and identity formation, ARC offers a flexible, components-based approach that can be adapted across clinical, educational, and residential settings. Its emphasis on relational safety and developmental repair aligns with contemporary neuroscience, which shows that trauma reorganizes the brain around survival rather than connection, making structured, predictable, and attuned environments essential for healing. Evaluations across multiple service systems have shown that ARC reduces PTSD symptoms, improves emotional and behavioral regulation, and enhances caregiver capacity, thereby positioning it as a leading model for addressing the developmental consequences of complex trauma in youth. The researcher of this paper was first introduced to the ARC framework in 2005 when it was implemented with the opening of the Alaska Child Trauma Center at Alaska Behavioral Health (AKBH) where I worked in various capacities (e.g., clinical operations, risk management and executive leadership). AKBH and the Alaska Child Trauma Center continue to be a premier provider of trauma-informed care for children and families, operating as a National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) center in Anchorage and Fairbanks, Alaska. It specializes in evidence-based, intensive outpatient, and comprehensive, trauma-focused care for youth.

[170] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score,* 55-62. The concept of *developmental grammar* refers to the implicit, internalized structure through which children learn to organize experience, interpret relationships, and regulate emotion across the stages of development. This grammar functions analogously to linguistic grammar in that it provides the underlying rules that allow the self to form coherent patterns of meaning, behavior, and relational expectation. When early caregiving is attuned, predictable, and responsive, children acquire a flexible developmental

Attachment: Confessional Belonging and the Need for Safety

Attachment theory emphasizes the human need for secure relational bonds.[171] In religious contexts, attachment extends beyond interpersonal relationships to also include attachment to tradition, authority, ritual, and communal identity. Contextualized theologically, attachment shapes how believers imagine God, as trustworthy or punitive, present or distant. Augustine's reflection in *Confessions* I.5 reveals a profound theological anthropology in which early relational experience becomes the template through which the soul learns to imagine and approach God. When Augustine confesses that God is "nearer to me than I am to myself," yet acknowledges that he first encountered the world through dependence on caregivers, he implicitly links divine relationality to human attachment. His admission that he could not seek God without already having been held, nourished, and responded to by others anticipates contemporary attachment theory, which argues that early patterns of attunement or neglect shape internal working models of trust, safety, and relational expectation. Thus, theologically (and anthropologically in which also attachment is mediated through ritual practices, sacred symbols, and communal narratives that provide continuity and meaning) this means that the believer's God-image (i.e., whether God is perceived as trustworthy or punitive, present or distant) is not formed in abstraction but emerges from the developmental "grammar" established in infancy. Secure attachment disposes the heart to receive God as benevolent and faithful, while disrupted or inconsistent attachment can incline the imagination toward a God who is unpredictable, withholding, or severe. Augustine's insight therefore illuminates the deep continuity between psychological formation and spiritual perception in that the way one has been held becomes the way one learns to be held by God.[172] Considered psychologically, attachment wounds (whether individual or communal) heighten vulnerability to fear, hypervigilance, and identity fusion[173] because they erode the basic sense of safety that

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grammar capable of integrating affect, cognition, and social experience. However, chronic trauma, neglect, or relational inconsistency disrupts this grammar, producing fragmented or rigid patterns of survival-based functioning that persist into adulthood. Contemporary trauma research emphasizes that healing requires not just behavioral change but the reconstruction of this developmental grammar through safe attachment, co-regulation, and opportunities for mastery.

[171] John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 1 (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 45.

[172] Augustine, *Confessions*, I.5.

[173] Identity fusion is what happens when a person's sense of *self* becomes so tightly merged with their group that the two feel almost identical. Instead of thinking "I am part of this group," the person begins to feel "I *am* this group." When this happens, group boundaries feel like personal boundaries, group threats feel like personal threats, and defending the group becomes a way of defending the self. This makes people more reactive, more protective, and more rigid because disagreement is no longer just about ideas, but rather it feels like an attack on who they are.

supports flexible relational and cognitive functioning. When early or collective bonds are marked by inconsistency, betrayal, or threat, the nervous system shifts into chronic vigilance, scanning for danger and interpreting difference as risk. This survival-oriented posture narrows the self, making rigid group identification feel necessary for protection. As Judith Herman notes, trauma reorganizes the psyche around fear rather than connection, producing patterns of defensiveness that shape both personal identity and communal belonging.[174] Sociologically we can see how attachment forms the basis of group cohesion and boundary maintenance because the emotional bonds people develop (e.g., whether in families, communities, religious traditions, etc.) create a sense of belonging that holds the group together. In other words, people stay connected to a group when they feel safe, valued, and "at home" within it. These bonds make the group feel like a stable place where identity is affirmed. However, at the same time strong attachment also shapes how groups draw boundaries for example when belonging feels precious or fragile, members become more protective of who is "in" and who is "out." This helps to explain why tightly bonded groups often develop clear rules, shared rituals, and strong expectations for loyalty. Sociologists note that these attachment-based bonds are what allow communities to maintain unity, transmit values, and regulate membership across generations.[175]

Trauma disrupts attachment by destabilizing trust. Catholic communities with histories of persecution, anticlerical violence, or clerical betrayal may develop *institutional* attachment insecurity, leading to overreliance on hierarchy or tradition as compensatory structures.[176] On the other hand, Protestant communities that have been shaped by persecution, coercion, or doctrinal conflict may develop interpretive attachment insecurity, leading to hypervigilance toward authority and an overemphasis on personal conscience.[177]

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[174] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 86.

[175] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 59.

[176] Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France*, 112. Trauma destabilizes trust, so communities with histories of persecution or betrayal often turn to hierarchy and tradition because these structures feel predictable, enduring, and emotionally containing. When attachment has been shaken, stable authority and inherited practices offer a sense of order that helps regulate fear and restore collective identity.

[177] McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 89. Protestant communities shaped by persecution, coercion, or intense doctrinal conflict often develop a form of interpretive attachment insecurity, in which trust in external authority feels fragile or risky. When historical experience has taught a community that authority can wound, mislead, or oppress, believers become hypervigilant toward any structure that appears controlling or intrusive. In this context, personal conscience becomes a protective anchor in that it becomes a way of ensuring that faith cannot be taken, distorted, or imposed from outside. This overreliance on individual interpretation is just theological but psychological as it reflects a survival strategy rooted in the need to guard against the relational and institutional vulnerabilities inherited from the past.

Patristic sources also help to illuminate the theological dimension of attachment, as seen in Augustine's reflections on disordered love, revealing that when attachment is misdirected (whether toward *power, purity*, or *positivity,* i.e., the craving for absolute certainty) it becomes a source of spiritual distortion. For Augustine, the problem is not the presence of desire but rather its misalignment when he talks about how the human heart clings to finite goods as if they were ultimate, seeking from them the stability and security that only God can provide. Thus, when attachment is redirected toward *power*, it bends the soul toward domination; when it fixates on *purity*, it collapses into scrupulosity or exclusion; when it seeks *positivity* (i.e., epistemic certainty), it mistakes control for faith and turns theology into a defensive shield rather than a path of trust. In each case, misdirected attachment reshapes the believer's imagination, narrowing the capacity to perceive God truthfully and to love others freely.[178]

Regulation: Emotional Reactivity and Confessional Rigidity

Regulation refers to the capacity to manage emotional arousal, tolerate ambiguity, and respond to stress without resorting to defensive extremes.[179] Trauma thus impairs this regulation, producing heightened reactivity, fear-based reasoning, and rigid cognitive patterns. When synthesized with a theological framework, dysregulation narrows the imagination, reducing complex doctrines to simplistic binaries because the anxious mind seeks clarity, control, and cognitive closure rather than mystery, nuance, or contemplative depth. When fear constricts the interpretive horizon, doctrines that were meant to invite wonder (e.g., the Trinity, Incarnation, or sacramental presence) are flattened into rigid categories that feel safer than the open-ended enthusiasm and energy of classical Christian thought. As Rowan Williams notes, theological imagination requires a capacity to dwell within tension and paradox, a capacity that dysregulation undermines by pushing the believer toward absolutism or reductionism.[180] Through the anthropological lens, dysregulation reshapes ritual life into mechanisms of control rather than

[178] Augustine, *Confessions*, I-5; X.29.

[179] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 31.

[180] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 7-9. Basically, Williams is saying that good theology requires the ability to sit with complexity, in other words, to hold together ideas that don't fit neatly, to accept mystery, and to live with questions that don't have quick answers. This kind of spacious, flexible imagination is essential for understanding a faith built on apparent paradoxes like God being both transcendent and near, or Christ being both human and divine. But when a person is emotionally dysregulated (e.g., anxious, overwhelmed, operating in survival mode) that flexibility collapses. The mind then reaches for black-and-white/binary type answers because they feel safer. Instead of being able to hold tension, the believer is pushed toward absolutism ("there is only one correct way to see this") or reductionism ("this complex truth must be simplified so I can control it").

communion, because *rituals that once functioned as shared practices of belonging* now become instruments for managing anxiety, enforcing boundaries, or policing purity. Mary Douglas's analysis of ritual systems demonstrates that it is when communities feel threatened that symbolic practices tighten, boundaries harden, and the ritual body shifts from expressing shared meaning to safeguarding social order.[181] In such contexts, ritual precision becomes a proxy for safety, and the liturgical life of the community reflects not the expansiveness of divine hospitality but the defensive posture of a group seeking protection from perceived instability.[182]

Psychologically, it manifests as the triad Fear → Fixation → Ferocity, where fear triggers fixation on boundary markers and ferocity toward perceived threats.[183] Further study shows that sociologically dysregulation fuels polarization, factionalism, and suspicion of the "other" because anxious or destabilized groups tend to sort themselves into rigid camps that offer a sense of safety and identity. Thus, when people feel overwhelmed or threatened, they gravitate toward like-minded subgroups, amplify differences, and interpret outsiders as potential dangers rather than partners in shared social life. In sum, this emotional narrowing accelerates "us versus them" thinking, hardens boundaries, and reduces the willingness to trust, cooperate, or compromise across group lines.[184]

Catholic dysregulation often manifests as authoritarian defensiveness, where magisterial authority (or even the authority of a favorite bishop or priest) becomes a shield against uncertainty. Protestant dysregulation on the other hand often manifests as doctrinal purism, where interpretive

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[181] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 121.

[182] Ibid., 121. When a community becomes anxious or feels threatened, the safeguarding of social order shifts from a shared life of meaning to a defensive system of control. As Douglas observes, threatened groups tighten their symbolic world, and this tightening shows up in concrete, everyday ways. Ritual precision becomes a test of loyalty rather than a language of worship. For example, minor liturgical variations such as a different hymn choice or a slight change in posture are treated as signs of impurity or dissent. Boundaries harden as newcomers or internal critics are viewed with suspicion, and a once-welcoming community begins subtly excluding those who do not immediately conform. Authority grows more rigid and punitive, with leaders enforcing strict rules or disciplining minor infractions to stabilize a fragile sense of identity. Even symbols become over-loaded with defensive meaning, for example, a vestment, translation, or doctrinal phrase becomes a litmus test for who is "in" and who is "out." Communal memory is conditioned to reinforce narratives of danger, emphasizing past persecution while downplaying stories of hospitality. In sum, social order is "protected," but in a distorted form as one that prioritizes *control* over *communion* and *anxiety management* over *associative meaning*.

[183] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 89.

[184] For sociological analyses of polarization and affective division, see Kati Kish Bar-On et al., "Unraveling Polarization: Insights into Individual and Collective Dynamics," *PNAS Nexus* 3, no. 10 (2024).

autonomy becomes a fortress against perceived coercion.[185] Gregory the Great warned that leaders who fail to regulate their own passions inevitably wound the communities they serve.[186]

Competency: Developmental Capacity for Discernment and Dialogue

Competency refers to the skills necessary for healthy functioning: self-reflection, relational empathy, problem-solving, and adaptive interpretation.[187] Trauma undermines competency by impairing both cognitive flexibility and relational trust, making it harder for individuals and communities to respond to complexity with steadiness rather than fear.[188] In a theological sense, competency enables believers to engage the Christian tradition with maturity rather than rigidity, allowing them to hold paradox and theological/doctrinal tension, receive wisdom, and discern faithfully without collapsing into defensive certainty.[189] Seen anthropologically, competency allows communities to adapt rituals and symbols in ways that preserve identity while remaining responsive to changing contexts in what Victor Turner describes as the dynamic, living quality of ritual life.[190] From a psychological perspective competency supports interpretive charity, curiosity, and humility, qualities that trauma often constricts by pushing the mind toward hypervigilance and threat-based interpretation.[191] In a sociological context competency fosters cooperation, shared discernment, and ecumenical openness, thereby strengthening the social fabric by enabling groups to collaborate across difference rather than retreat into factionalism.[192]

In sum, competency deficits explain why confessional groups often respond to difference with suspicion rather than dialogue.[193] John Cassian, the fifth-century monk, theologian, and spiritual teacher whose work shaped the development of Western monasticism, insisted that

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[185] Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 91.

[186] Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Rule*, I.2. Gregory's warning emerges from a late-sixth-century context in which the Roman world was marked by political instability, social fragmentation, and deep moral anxiety. As bishop of Rome during the collapse of imperial structures, Gregory saw firsthand how unregulated leaders (whether civil or ecclesial) *could magnify disorder through anger, pride, or ambition*. His insistence that pastors must first govern their own passions before governing others reflects this historical reality that in a fragile society, a leader's inner turmoil easily became communal turmoil. For Gregory, the pastor's character was not a private matter but a public safeguard for when leaders lacked self-discipline, they inevitably harmed the very flock they were called to heal.

[187] Blaustein and Kinniburgh, *Treating Traumatic Stress*, 112.

[188] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 62-67.

[189] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 7-9.

[190] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94-130.

[191] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 86-93.

[192] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 59-61.

[193] Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, 93.

discernment is the "mother of virtues" underscores that spiritual maturity requires developmental growth, as opposed to just doctrinal correctness.[194]

Trauma shapes confessional identity not only through historical wounds or doctrinal conflicts but through the deeper developmental dynamics captured by the ARC model. Each domain reveals how trauma alters the way individuals and communities imagine God, relate to authority, process emotion, and engage in discernment. When integrated into the TAPS methodology, ARC provides a developmental grammar for understanding why Catholic and Protestant traditions respond to perceived threats with such predictable patterns of defensiveness, absolutism, and boundary-tightening. The table below distills these dynamics into a comparative at-a-glance view of how trauma reshapes confessional belonging, emotional regulation, and interpretive capacity across both traditions.

Table 7. Comparative Mapping of the ARC Trauma Model in Catholic and Protestant Identity

ARC Domain	Core Concept	Catholic Expression	Protestant Expression
Attachment	Need for secure belonging; relational and symbolic safety	Healthy: Communal belonging, sacramental continuity, stable ritual identity. Distorted: Institutional attachment insecurity; overreliance on hierarchy or clerical authority as compensatory safety.	Healthy: Personal responsibility, conscience-driven faith, intimate relational piety. Distorted: Interpretive attachment insecurity; hypervigilance toward authority; overemphasis on "private judgment" as a shield.

[194] John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), II. Cassian's claim that discernment is the "mother of virtues" means that genuine spiritual maturity is not achieved simply by knowing the right doctrines or following the right rules. For Cassian, discernment (*discretio*) is the inner capacity to judge wisely, to read one's motives truthfully, and to choose the good in ways that fit a person's stage of growth. It is the virtue that *guides* all the others, preventing zeal from becoming harshness, humility from becoming self-contempt, or obedience from becoming servility. In this sense, Cassian is making a developmental argument in that the spiritual life unfolds gradually, and without discernment the virtues become distorted or misapplied. His point is that holiness is formed through growth in wisdom, and not just through correct belief alone, and that the Christian life requires ongoing maturation of perception, judgment, and self-knowledge.

Attachment Drivers	What shapes the God-image and group belonging	Augustinian Root: Early holding → capacity to be held by God. Trauma: Misdirected attachment → authoritarianism, scrupulosity, and epistemic control.	Augustinian Refraction: Disrupted attachment → fear of domination, interpretive isolation, and purity-based exclusion.
Regulation	Capacity to manage emotional arousal and tolerate ambiguity	Healthy: Ritual stability, contemplative imagination, sacramental spaciousness. Distorted: Authoritarian defensiveness; ritual precision used for anxiety management; fear → fixation → ferocity.	Healthy: Textual depth, moral seriousness, adaptive conscience. Distorted: Doctrinal purism; absolutist binaries; fear → fixation on "orthodoxy" → ferocity toward compromise.
Regulation Dynamics	How trauma shapes emotional and cognitive patterns	Dysregulation narrows theological imagination; doctrine becomes rigid; ritual becomes boundary-policing rather than communion.	Dysregulation collapses interpretive flexibility; Scripture becomes weaponized; conscience becomes a defensive fortress.
Competency	Capacity for discernment, empathy, and adaptive interpretation	Healthy: Ability to hold paradox; mature reception of tradition; communal discernment. Distorted: Overdependence on magisterial certainty; reduced flexibility; diminished ecumenical openness.	Healthy: Interpretive charity, relational accountability, adaptive engagement with Scripture. Distorted: Suspicion of communal authority; fragmentation; reduced capacity for shared discernment.
Competency Outcomes	How trauma affects communal functioning	Trauma weakens adaptive ritual life; boundaries harden; leaders' unregulated passions wound the "Body of Christ."	Trauma fuels factionalism; interpretive autonomy becomes isolation; cooperation across difference becomes impossible.

Collectively these patterns show that Catholic and Protestant rigidity does not arise from fundamentally different psychologies but from parallel distortions within the same developmental domains. We can see how trauma disrupts attachment, making both traditions more protective of their symbolic worlds and how it impairs regulation, narrowing theological imagination and amplifying fear-based reasoning. And in addition, it weakens competency, reducing the capacity for discernment, empathy, and adaptive interpretation. What does differ is the *symbolic expression*

of these disruptions seen in the hierarchy and sacrament for Catholics and conscience and text for Protestants. By mapping these dynamics side by side, the table reveals a shared architecture of vulnerability beneath confessional difference.

The developmental distortions outlined in the ARC model reveal how trauma constricts the imagination, narrows emotional capacity, and weakens the skills necessary for healthy discernment. Nevertheless, these same domains (attachment, regulation, and competency) also provide the pathways through which healing and transformation become possible. If trauma bends confessional identity toward rigidity, fear, and defensiveness, then spiritual maturity bends it back toward trust, openness, and relational depth. Part III turns from diagnosis to development, exploring how individuals and communities can cultivate the capacities that trauma diminishes. The following section outlines a vision of transformation that is both psychologically grounded and theologically rich by tracing the movements that restore secure attachment, strengthen emotional regulation, and deepen interpretive competency.

Part III - Spiritual Maturity and Transformation

Spiritual maturity represents the culmination of the theological, anthropological, psychological, and sociological dynamics explored in Parts I and II. It is the point at which the believer's identity, imagination, and relational posture are no longer governed by fear, trauma, or confessional defensiveness but are instead shaped by grace, humility, and a secure sense of belonging in God.[195]

This section therefore expands the earlier framework by offering a multi-layered, exposition of how maturity unfolds within Catholic and Protestant traditions and how both converge in the G.R.A.C.E. framework. Patristic and medieval sources are used sparingly and strategically to supplement modern scholarship, grounding contemporary insights in the deep well of Christian tradition.

[195] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 507; Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 86; Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 241; Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67. Spiritual maturity, understood through the combined insights of Taylor, Herman, Lonergan, and Volf, marks the point at which the believer's identity is no longer organized around fear, trauma, or defensive postures but is instead grounded in a horizon of grace-shaped belonging in God. Taylor's account of the self's formation within "horizons of significance" shows that maturity requires a reorientation of imagination toward a transcendent moral source capable of freeing the self from constricted, fear-based identity structures. Herman's analysis of trauma clarifies why fear, hypervigilance, and rigidity dominate immature religious experience in that trauma fragments the self and narrows relational capacity, making defensive confessionalism feel necessary for survival. Lonergan's description of religious conversion as a transformation of the subject into a horizon of authenticity, responsibility, and love reveals that maturity is not only psychological healing but a theological reconstitution of the self through God's unrestricted grace. Volf's vision of identity shaped by divine embrace demonstrates that only a self securely held in God can relinquish exclusionary defensiveness and extend hospitality, humility, and openness toward the other. Together, these thinkers illuminate spiritual maturity as the integrated healing of the self (anthropologically expanded, psychologically regulated, theologically converted, and relationally freed) so that the believer's posture is governed not by fear or trauma but by grace, humility, and a secure sense of belonging in God.

1. Mature Catholic Spirituality

Mature Catholic spirituality is more than just the absence of rigidity, it is also the presence of a transformed interior life as it reflects a reconfiguration of the believer's relationship to authority, tradition, and community. This transformation is not instantaneous, but it rather unfolds through a gradual process of healing, discernment, and reorientation of desire. Bernard Lonergan's account of religious conversion provides a rich framework for articulating why mature Catholic spirituality cannot be reduced to the mere absence of rigidity but must be understood as the positive emergence of a transformed interior life. On page 241 of *Method in Theology*, Lonergan describes religious conversion as a "being-in-love in an unrestricted fashion," a radical reorientation of the subject that reshapes knowing, valuing, and acting from the inside out. This transformation is not a momentary shift in opinion or a loosening of confessional strictness, but rather it is the gradual reconstitution of the self through grace, a re-patterning of consciousness that alters how the believer relates to God, authority, tradition, and the ecclesial community. In Lonergan's terms, conversion generates a new horizon (i.e., a new field of meaning and value) within which the believer's desires, judgments, and commitments are progressively purified and integrated.

Within this horizon, *authority* is no longer experienced as an external force that must be defended *or* resisted but rather as a mediating structure that orients the believer toward truth and communion. *Tradition* ceases to function as a static repository of rules and regulations, and instead becomes a living stream of wisdom that invites participation, interpretation, and discernment. *Community* is no longer a boundary to be policed but a body to be loved, served, and built up. As noted, these shifts and transformations do not occur instantaneously. Instead, they unfold through

a long process of healing from fear, learning to discern the movements of grace,[196] and allowing desire itself to be reoriented toward God. Lonergan's emphasis on the cumulative, developmental nature of conversion underscores that maturity is not achieved by suppressing rigidity but by cultivating a deeply integrated interior life, one in which authenticity, humility, and charity arise from a self that is transformed by divine love.[197] The TAPS methodology shows that this maturation involves a simultaneous theological deepening, anthropological re-grounding, psychological integration, and sociological re-patterning.

1.1 From Defensiveness to Humble Service (Humility Replaces Authoritarian Defensiveness)

Theological

Humility is more than just simply a moral virtue, it is a theological disposition; a part of one's temperament and character. It reflects a recognition that all authority in the Church is derivative, not original, that is, to say that no person, office, or institution within the Church possesses authority *from themselves* or *by their own power*. Every form of ecclesial authority (e.g., papal, episcopal, conciliar, scriptural, sacramental, communal, etc.) derives its legitimacy from Christ, who alone is the original source of authority in the Church.[198] In other words, modern Catholic ecclesiology emphasizes that the Church's authority is always *participated* authority in that it is rooted in Christ's self-emptying love rather than institutional self-assertion.[199]

Patristic voices supplement this by reminding us that the early Church understood leadership as a form of martyrdom. Chrysostom famously lamented the burden of the episcopacy,

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[196] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 241. Discerning the movements of grace means learning to recognize the subtle interior shifts by which God draws, redirects, and deepens the heart. It is the growing ability to distinguish impulses rooted in fear or ego from those that lead toward humility, communion, and authentic love. As this sensitivity develops, the believer becomes increasingly capable of cooperating with God's transforming work and living from the new horizon that grace creates.

[197] Ibid., 241. For Lonergan, human beings do not simply *hold* beliefs; they *inhabit* horizons, i.e., background frameworks that determine what they notice, what they care about, what they consider important, and how they interpret experience. A "field of meaning and value" is this entire horizon: the world of significance, purpose, and moral orientation within which the self lives. Thus, his phrase, "a new field of meaning and value" names one of the most important aspects of his entire theory of conversion. It is his way of describing what happens when a person's *whole horizon* (their way of seeing, interpreting, desiring, and evaluating reality) is transformed by grace.

[198] Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 45.

[199] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 112.

warning that the bishop's role is one of sacrificial service rather than domination.[200] This patristic witness reinforces the contemporary critique of authoritarian defensiveness by grounding it in the Church's earliest pastoral theology.

Anthropological

Here in the anthropological framework, humility reorients the Catholic imagination from a fortress mentality to a relational one by reshaping how the Church is perceived as a social world. As Berger and Luckmann argue, human communities construct and sustain shared realities through ongoing patterns of interaction that define what is taken as meaningful, credible, and secure.[201] When humility is operative, then these socially constructed patterns shift in that the symbolic universe of Catholic life (e.g., its rituals, narratives, communal practices) is no longer organized around the preservation of purity or the policing of boundaries but around *participation, partnership* (reciprocity), and *peoplehood* (mutual belonging). In this reframed imagination, the Church ceases to function as a type of fortress protecting itself from contamination and instead becomes a relational ecosystem in which identity is formed through shared practices, trust, and embodied solidarity. Thus, it is humility that transforms the anthropological posture of the believer, replacing defensive isolation with a communal mode of life grounded in openness, vulnerability, and the recognition that the Church's very reality is co-created through authentic relationships rather than rigidity. Rituals, symbols, and communal practices are no longer instruments of control but become true expressions of shared identity.

This shift further shows alignment with anthropological studies showing that communities marked by humility foster greater trust, cooperation, and resilience. It is understood as a posture of mutual dependence, shared vulnerability, and openness to correction that develops stronger patterns of trust, cooperation, and collective resilience. Douglas's analysis of purity systems shows that rigid, high-boundary groups often respond to threat by intensifying exclusion and hierarchy, whereas communities that practice humility loosen these defensive mechanisms and create social environments more conducive to reciprocity and shared responsibility.[202] Ethnographic studies of monastic communities, for example, reveal that practices of confession, mutual obedience, and

[200] John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 11, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), Homily 4.

[201] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 59.

[202] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 121.

shared labor foster deep interpersonal trust and reduce status competition, enabling the group to adapt more flexibly to internal and external pressures.[203] Research on Andean *ayllu* structures likewise shows that humility expressed through communal decision-making and ritualized reciprocity (*ayni*) strengthens cooperation and buffers the community against ecological and economic shocks.[204] Similarly, studies of West African village councils demonstrate that leaders who model humility by seeking consensus, acknowledging limits, and deferring to communal wisdom, all enhance group cohesion and conflict resolution capacity.[205] Across these diverse contexts, humility functions as a social virtue that lowers defensiveness, increases relational permeability, and strengthens the community's ability to endure stress without fragmenting. Humility thus becomes a cultural posture that reshapes the Church's internal dynamics.

Psychological

Humility psychologically functions as the antidote to the trauma-driven need for control in that trauma generates hypervigilance, cognitive rigidity, and heightened threat sensitivity, and thereby narrowing the individual's capacity for flexibility and trust. As Judith Herman observes, traumatic experience reorganizes the survivor's inner world around vigilance and defense rather than openness or relational engagement. In this state, control becomes a type of compensatory strategy, that is, a way to manage internal chaos by tightening boundaries, reducing ambiguity, and clinging to certainty.[206]

Humility counteracts this dynamic by loosening the grip of fear and allowing the self to acknowledge limits without interpreting them as danger, to tolerate ambiguity without collapsing into rigidity, and to engage others without perceiving difference as a threat. Thus (psychologically), humility restores cognitive and emotional flexibility, and spiritually it grounds identity in God rather than in defensive self-protection. Thus, humility in turn becomes a form of healing because

[203] See for example: Charles Hirschkind, "Ethics, Listening, and the Monastic Body." In *The Anthropology of Religion: A Reader*, edited by Fiona Bowie, 2nd ed., 431-442. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. which documents how humility practices in monastic settings generate trust and reduce intra-group rivalry.

[204] Catherine J. Allen, *The Hold Life Has: Coca and Cultural Identity in an Andean Community* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), esp. chapters on *ayni* and communal reciprocity.

[205] Meyer Fortes, *The Dynamics of Clanship Among the Tallensi* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), which highlights how humility in leadership stabilizes social relations and enhances group resilience.

[206] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 86.

it interrupts trauma-based patterns of control and opens space for trust, curiosity, and genuine relational presence.[207]

Bernard of Clairvaux is seen describing humility as the "ordering of the soul," in which the self is freed from the compulsions of pride and fear. For Bernard, humility is not just a moral attitude but a structural reorientation of one's inner life, a disciplined alignment of desire, will, and perception toward truth rather than self-assertion. In this ordered state, the soul is no longer driven by the anxious need to elevate itself or defend its status, but instead it becomes capable of receiving grace, discerning reality without distortion, and relating to others without rivalry or suspicion.[208]

Sociological

From the sociological perspective, humility transforms the Church's posture toward the world by shifting it from self-protection to relational openness. A humble Church does not perceive cultural, theological, or institutional differences as threats to its identity but as invitations to mutual learning and shared pursuit of the common good.[209] This in turn resists the impulse to fortify boundaries or assert dominance while instead it pursues and cultivates practices of *receptivity* (listening), *reception* (hospitality), and *reciprocity* (cooperation). As Miroslav Volf argues, genuine Christian engagement requires an "embrace" that neither dissolves identity nor excludes the other, but rather creates a space where difference can be encountered without fear.[210] In this mode, the Church becomes a social body capable of dialogue, collaboration, and collective discernment, modeling a form of communal life that prioritizes *reconciliation* over *rivalry* and *participation*

[207] Ibid., 86. Herman's analysis is strictly clinical and sociopolitical in scope. *Trauma and Recovery* does not address theological categories, divine agency, or spiritual transformation. Her work is cited here solely for its account of trauma's psychological effects, not for any claims about God or spiritual identity.

[208] Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*, trans. M. Ambrose, 1.

[209] As evidenced by the Second Vatican Council's call for dialogue with other Christian communities and with the modern world, which explicitly reframed engagement with difference as a path toward truth, reconciliation, and shared responsibility for human flourishing. For further information see: Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1965), 3 to 4.

[210] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67. According to Volf, the Church is called to mirror the self-giving love of the triune God by becoming a community that practices listening, hospitality, and cooperation rather than defensiveness or withdrawal. A humble Church therefore does not interpret cultural, theological, or institutional differences as threats to its integrity but as invitations to mutual learning and shared pursuit of the common good. Such humility enables the Church to inhabit the public sphere not as a besieged institution guarding its boundaries but as a collaborative partner in the work of justice, peace, and human flourishing.

over *polemics*. Therefore, humility further enables the Church to inhabit the public sphere not as a besieged institution but as a partner in the shared work of justice, peace, and human flourishing.[211]

Catherine of Siena called the Church to reform through humility, insisting that true authority is exercised through *convincing* (persuasion), not *coercion*. For Catherine, the credibility of ecclesial leadership rests not in displays of power but in the transparent witness of a life conformed to Christ's self-giving love.[212] She repeatedly urges popes, bishops, and civic rulers to lead through moral example, patient counsel, and steadfast charity, arguing that hearts are won not by *tension* (force) but by the gentle strength of *truth*. In her letters, she frames humility as the posture that enables leaders to *detect* (listen), *discern*, and *direct* (guide) without domination, creating the conditions in which genuine reform can take root.[213] In this vision, authority becomes an act of service ordered toward the healing and unity of the Church rather than the *preservation of position or power*. In addition, this sociological posture enables the Church to participate in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue without fear of losing identity.

1.2 From Legalism to Discernment (Healing Replaces Legalistic Rigidity)

Theological

Healing is central to Catholic theology.[214] Modern sacramental theology emphasizes that grace heals the wounds of sin and restores the integrity of human nature. Lonergan underscores that the sacraments mediate God's healing presence by transforming the interior operations of the person, reordering consciousness, and restoring the capacity for authentic self-transcendence.[215]

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[211] Ibid., 66-68.

[212] Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), 74.

[213] Ibid., Letter 74, 72-74. In this letter to Pope Gregory XI, Catherine urges him to lead through patient counsel, moral example, and humble persuasion rather than force or fear.

[214] This conviction is rooted deeply in early Christian history and theology. The earliest fathers understood salvation not only as forgiveness but as the healing of human nature wounded by sin. Writers like Ignatius of Antioch called Christ the "physician of the soul and body," emphasizing that the Incarnation brings restorative transformation (as opposed to just juridical). Irenaeus described redemption as the gradual "recapitulation" of humanity, in which Christ heals and reorders what sin has disfigured. The Cappadocians likewise framed salvation as *therapeia*, a therapeutic process in which the Holy Spirit restores the image of God within the person. This early Christian vision grounds later Catholic sacramental theology, which understands grace as the divine power that heals, renews, and reintegrates the human person into communion with God and others. For further examples see: Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 5.21.1, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, trans. Alexander Roberts and W. H. Rambaut (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994). Irenaeus describes salvation as the healing and restoration of human nature through the incarnate Word, emphasizing that Christ "became what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is" (546).

[215] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 241.

In this view, healing is not just the removal of moral fault (guilt) but the gradual renewal of the whole person, enabling human nature to participate more fully in God's life. Legalistic rigidity, by contrast, treats law as an end in itself rather than a means to healing.

Athanasius grants insight by describing the Incarnation as God's act of restoring humanity to its original beauty. He teaches that when the Word takes on human flesh, he repairs the divine image that sin had obscured, renewing human nature from within. In *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius emphasizes that the Son becomes human so that humanity might be healed, restored, and re-clothed in the likeness of God. In this vision, salvation is more than a legal pardon, it is also a transformative renewal in which Christ reconstitutes the human person according to its original splendor.[216] This patristic insight reinforces the contemporary emphasis on healing as the heart of Catholic spirituality.

Anthropological

Healing anthropologically reopens the symbolic world of Catholicism where rituals become sites of transformation rather than mechanisms of control because they function as embodied practices through which meaning is reconstituted and the self is reoriented toward God and community. When wounds are addressed and fear loosens its grip, the sacraments can be experienced not as external obligations but as participatory encounters that reshape identity, restore belonging, and renew one's capacity for trust. As Victor Turner's work on ritual suggests, healing allows symbols to regain their generative power, enabling liturgical actions to mediate genuine personal and communal renewal rather than reinforce hierarchical constraint.[217]

Medieval liturgists like Amalarius of Metz further supplement this by portraying liturgy as a healing drama in which the believer is gradually restored to wholeness.[218] In his allegorical interpretations, the liturgy functions as a therapeutic sequence in which the worshiper is re-formed through symbolic action, sacred narrative, and embodied participation. This anthropological vision

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[216] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 54-56. Athanasius explains that the Word assumes human nature in order to renew the divine image and restore humanity to its original beauty.

[217] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94-97.

[218] Amalarius of Metz, *Liber officialis*, in *Amalarius of Metz: On the Liturgy*, trans. Eric Knibbs (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 112-15.

aligns with contemporary ritual studies, which emphasize the therapeutic power of symbolic action to reshape identity, restore communal bonds, and mediate experiences of transformation.[219]

Psychological

Within a psychological framework, healing involves the integration of fragmented parts of the self. Trauma produces dissociation, rigidity, and emotional numbing, disrupting the person's capacity to regulate affect, sustain coherent identity, and remain relationally present. When healing occurs, these split-off experiences can be reintegrated into a more flexible and cohesive sense of self, allowing for renewed emotional responsiveness and adaptive functioning.[220]

In addition, Julian of Norwich compliments this by describing healing as the restoration of the soul's capacity to perceive divine love rather than fear. For her, the deepest wound of sin is not moral failure but the distorted imagination that expects judgment instead of mercy. Thus, healing occurs when this fear is displaced by a renewed awareness of God's unwavering love, allowing the soul to rest, trust, and see reality truthfully. In Julian's visions, divine love patiently reorients the inner world, enabling the believer to interpret suffering, selfhood, and God through the lens of compassion rather than anxiety.[221] Her mystical theology aligns with contemporary trauma research, which emphasizes the role of secure attachment in healing.

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[219] See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 128-31; and Ronald L. Grimes, *Rite and Responsibility: Essays on Ritual and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 42-45. Both argue that ritual functions as a transformative and therapeutic process that reconfigures personal and communal identity.

[220] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 96-99. van der Kolk argues that trauma fractures a person's inner world, leaving parts of the self disconnected, numb, or stuck in past danger. Healing, in his account, is the gradual reintegration of these split-off experiences through practices that restore safety, bodily awareness, emotional flexibility, and relational connection. Because trauma is held in the body as much as in the mind, recovery involves learning to inhabit the present without being overwhelmed, reconnecting with sensations and feelings, processing memories in a way that no longer hijacks the nervous system, and rebuilding trust in supportive relationships. In this integrated state, the person can think, feel, and relate with greater coherence and wholeness.

[221] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing (London: Penguin, 1998), ch. 27. Norwich was a 14th-century English anchoress and visionary theologian whose *Revelations of Divine Love* stands as the earliest surviving book in English written by a woman. Living through waves of plague, social upheaval, and personal suffering, she received a series of vivid "showings" of Christ's passion that reshaped her understanding of God. From her small church anchorhold in Norwich, she articulated a theology marked by radical trust in divine goodness, insisting that God is all love and no wrath, and that Christ relates to humanity with maternal tenderness. Her famous assurance that "all shall be well" emerges not from naivete but from a profound conviction that divine love ultimately holds and heals the world. In an age defined by fear and instability, Julian's voice remains a witness to spiritual resilience, contemplative clarity, and a non-defensive imagination capable of integrating suffering without collapsing into despair or rigidity. She is not formally canonized as a saint, but she is widely regarded as a holy woman, mystic, and spiritual teacher within Catholic tradition. The Church includes her in the Roman Martyrology (the official list of those venerated for their holiness), which is a significant recognition even without formal canonization. Many

Sociological

Analyzing from a Sociological perspective, healing requires institutional repentance and structural reform. For example, modern ecclesiology emphasizes that genuine renewal cannot occur without transparent practices, accountable leadership, and structures capable of addressing harm rather than concealing it. In this view, healing is more than just a personal or spiritual process, it is also a communal one in which the Church acknowledges wrongdoing, repairs breaches of trust, and cultivates practices of restorative justice that rebuild credibility and foster a more truthful, participatory ecclesial life.[222]

Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Rule* illustrates this by insisting that pastors must confess their own wounds to heal the flock. For Gregory, effective spiritual leadership requires humility and self-knowledge; a pastor who hides his weaknesses cannot meaningfully guide others toward healing. By acknowledging his own vulnerabilities, the pastor models the very conversion he seeks to cultivate, creating a climate of honesty, compassion, and mutual restoration within the community.[223] Therefore, healing thus becomes a communal and institutional process, not just an individual one.

1.3 From Authoritarianism to Accompaniment (Harmony Replaces Institutional Pride)

Theological

Harmony reflects the Church's vocation to be a sign of unity in a fractured world. Thus, modern ecclesiology emphasizes that unity is not a flattening of difference but a dynamic harmony in which diverse gifts, charisms, and perspectives contribute to the Church's common life. Dulles argues that authentic unity emerges when the Church holds together multiplicity without collapsing it into uniformity, allowing the Spirit to weave diversity into a coherent whole ordered toward mission and communion.[224]

Catholic theologians, religious orders, and spiritual writers treat her as part of the Church's mystical heritage, and she is commemorated liturgically in some places.

[222] Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 219-23. Gaillardetz argues that authentic ecclesial renewal requires transparent governance, accountable leadership, and structural mechanisms capable of addressing harm and fostering restorative justice.

[223] Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Rule*, trans. George Demacopoulos, II.

[224] Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 67.

Cyprian coincides with this by emphasizing that unity is grounded in charity, not coercion. For him, the Church's oneness is sustained by mutual love, patient forbearance, and the shared desire for communion rather than by force or institutional pressure. Therefore, unity arises when believers choose fidelity to one another in Christ, allowing *charity* (not *compulsion*) to bind the community together in peace.[225] Thus this patristic insight reinforces the contemporary emphasis on unity-in-diversity.

Anthropological

Considered anthropologically, harmony integrates diverse cultural expressions of Catholicism. Rather than imposing a single cultural form, the Church embodies a unity that emerges through the interplay of many local traditions, devotional practices, and symbolic worlds. Contemporary global Catholic studies[226] emphasize that this multicultural reality is not a threat to ecclesial identity but a source of vitality, revealing how the faith takes root in particular histories and cultures while remaining oriented toward a shared communion.[227]

Medieval Catholicism's diverse liturgical traditions supplement this by demonstrating historical precedent for unity in diversity. As Robert Taft shows, the Church's liturgical life developed through multiple regional rites (e.g., Roman, Gallican, Mozarabic, Ambrosian, and various Eastern usages) that differed in structure, symbolism, and local expression while remaining fully within the communion of the Church. This plurality reveals that Catholic unity has never depended on strict uniformity but has historically embraced a harmonious convergence of distinct liturgical cultures.[228] In sum, harmony thus becomes an anthropological posture of openness to cultural plurality.

Psychological

In a psychological sense, harmony emerges when identity is secure enough to welcome difference. As Aaron Beck notes, individuals who possess a stable and integrated sense of self are less threatened by other perspectives or people unlike themselves while insecurity (by contrast)

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[225] Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church*, trans. Maurice Bévenot (New York: Newman Press, 1971), 5.

[226] See Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 15-18; and Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 12-16, both of whom emphasize the multicultural, polycentric character of contemporary global Catholicism.

[227] Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*, 12.

[228] Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1986), 14.

fuels defensiveness, hostility, and rigid boundary-drawing. Therefore, when identity is grounded rather than fragile, the mind can approach difference with curiosity rather than fear, making genuine harmony possible.[229] In sum, harmony reflects emotional regulation, empathy, and resilience.

Bernard of Clairvaux noted this by portraying harmony as the soul's rest in God, which frees it from the need to dominate others. In his sermons, true peace arises when the soul is so anchored in divine love that it no longer seeks superiority, rivalry, or control. Thus, resting in God produces an interior equilibrium that overflows into gentle, non-competitive relationships, allowing the person to relate to others without fear or grasping.[230] In turn, this medieval insight aligns with contemporary psychology's emphasis on secure identity.

Sociological

Finally, from a sociological perspective, harmony enables collaboration with other traditions. Contemporary ecumenical frameworks argue that genuine unity is expressed not in isolation but in shared action, where churches learn from one another and work together for the common good. British Roman Catholic theologian Paul Murray's insight regarding receptive ecumenism highlights this position of mutual openness that emphasizes that each tradition is enriched when it receives the gifts, insights, and corrections of others in a spirit of cooperative engagement.[231]

Scholastic theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas provides additional insight by modeling intellectual engagement with Jewish, Muslim, and secular thinkers. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, he draws extensively on figures such as Maimonides, Avicenna, and Aristotle, therefore demonstrating that *truth* can be received from any source and integrated into Christian theology.[232] Aquinas's method shows that genuine harmony is fostered not by retreating from difference but by entering into rigorous, *charitable* dialogue with it, confident that all truth ultimately participates

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[229] Beck, *Prisoners of Hate*, 44.

[230] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 23.

[231] Paul Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

[232] Early Christian thinkers across several centuries shared a deep conviction that all truth (wherever it is found) ultimately comes from God, because God is the source of all wisdom, reason, and creation. This belief allowed them to engage confidently with Greek philosophy, Roman law, and non-Christian intellectual traditions without feeling that such engagement threatened Christian faith.

in the divine.[233] Harmony thus becomes a sociological position of openness and cooperation even in an age of diversity.

[233] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

2. Mature Protestant Spirituality

Mature Protestant spirituality involves a parallel transformation, moving from Autonomy → Anarchy → Alienation to Recognition → Reconciliation → Renewal. This transformation reflects a deepening of Protestant commitments to Scripture, conscience, and community.

2.1. Recognition of Communal Wisdom

Theological

Modern Protestant theology's growing emphasis on the communal dimensions of interpretation reflects a significant shift away from the older assumption that the individual believer (armed with Scripture and conscience[234]) stands as the primary locus of theological understanding. Alister McGrath notes that contemporary Protestant thought increasingly recognizes that interpretation is never a purely private act but rather it is shaped by the worshiping community, its liturgical practices, its historical memory, and its shared patterns of discernment.[235]

This development does not negate the Protestant affirmation of personal engagement with Scripture; however, it does reframe that engagement within a broader ecclesial world. The community becomes the interpretive horizon that forms the reader's imagination, offers guardrails against eccentric readings, and provides the relational context in which meaning is tested, refined, and embodied. In is in this sense that more contemporary Protestant theology converges (albeit without collapsing) toward insights long emphasized in Catholic and Orthodox traditions (i.e., that

[234] The phrase *"armed with Scripture and conscience"* is not traceable to a single author but summarizes a core Reformation posture most clearly rooted in Martin Luther's claim that his "conscience is captive to the Word of God." Luther's fusion of biblical authority with morally accountable conscience became foundational for Protestant identity, and later figures such as Calvin, Zwingli, the Anabaptists, and evangelical movements reinforced the same dynamic. Across these traditions, the believer is depicted as standing before God equipped with Scripture as the supreme norm and conscience as the site of divine responsibility. The modern phrase therefore functions as a concise description of the Protestant interpretive ethos rather than a historical quotation.

[235] McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 312.

the Church is more than just a gathering of individuals, it is a hermeneutical community in which Scripture is received, interpreted, and lived).[236] In sum, Scripture is authoritative, but interpretation is communal.

Patristic sources supplement this insight by showing that the early Church consistently treated Scripture as a communal possession whose meaning emerged within the shared life of the ecclesial body rather than through private interpretation. As J. N. D. Kelly notes, the Fathers assumed that the rule of faith, apostolic tradition, and the liturgical life of the Church formed the proper context for reading and discerning Scripture's meaning. The writings of figures such as Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, and Augustine reveal that biblical interpretation was embedded in preaching, catechesis, conciliar deliberation, and the continuity of apostolic teaching. In this environment, the community safeguarded the coherence of doctrine, corrected idiosyncratic readings, and ensured that Scripture was received within the Church's living memory rather than as a text subject to private judgment.[237] Therefore, patristic theology provides historical grounding for the claim that Christian interpretation has always been a communal, tradition-shaped practice, as opposed to an isolated exercise of individual conscience, and thus the patristic witness reinforces the contemporary emphasis on communal discernment.

Anthropological

From the view of anthropology this recognition restores Protestant participation in shared practices by emphasizing that human beings are shaped not only by ideas but by the embodied, communal rituals through which a community enacts its vision of the world. Contemporary anthropology of religion underscores that rituals form the habits, desires, and interpretive instincts of a people *long before they articulate doctrinal claims*.[238] As James K. A. Smith argues, worship

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[236] Modern Protestant theology's shift toward communal interpretation is evident across multiple traditions. Reformed, Anglican, Lutheran, Wesleyan, and Anabaptist churches increasingly emphasize that Scripture is read within the Church's shared worship, confessions, and historical memory rather than by isolated individuals. Scholars such as Vanhoozer, Wright, Hauerwas, and Smith reinforce this by arguing that liturgy, communal practices, and inherited narratives shape the interpretive imagination. Even evangelical and Pentecostal communities now foreground small-group study, corporate discernment, and confessional networks. Across these diverse settings, Protestantism has moved toward recognizing interpretation as a communal, tradition-formed practice rather than a solitary exercise of private conscience.

[237] J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978), 45.

[238] Classic theorists argue that ritual constructs the symbolic world in which meaning is first experienced: see Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 89. Turner likewise shows that ritual generates shared identity, emotional cohesion, and patterned expectations that guide interpretation at a tacit, embodied level; see *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 94. Bell extends this by demonstrating how ritual produces "ritualized agents" whose interpretive instincts are formed through repeated communal actions rather than abstract propositions; see *Ritual*

is not just expressive but *formative* in that liturgical practices train the imagination, orient the heart, and cultivate a shared worldview that binds individuals into a communal narrative. In this sense, Protestant retrieval of liturgical and communal practices reflects a renewed awareness that interpretation, identity, and discipleship are shaped through the patterned, bodily participation of the worshiping community rather than through isolated acts of private reflection.[239]

Patristic sources reinforce this insight by portraying early Christian worship as a fundamentally communal act through which Christian identity was formed, sustained, and transmitted. Gregory of Nazianzus's *Orations* repeatedly depict the Church gathered in worship as the locus where believers are shaped into a unified people, and not just instructed as isolated individuals. For Gregory, *liturgy is the arena* in which the faithful learn to see themselves as members of Christ's body, to internalize the Church's doctrinal and moral vision, and to participate in the shared life of the Trinity. His sermons assume that identity is forged through participation in common prayer, sacramental life, and the rhythms of the liturgical year (practices designed to bind individuals into a communal narrative of salvation). Thus Gregory exemplifies the broader patristic conviction that worship is not simply expressive devotion but a formative practice that molds the imagination, affections, and self-understanding of the Christian community. In his view, early Christian identity does not emerge from private interpretation or solitary spirituality but from the shared, embodied life of the Church gathered before God.[240] Therefore, recognition becomes an anthropological position of belonging.

Psychological

Psychologically speaking, this recognition tempers the hyper-individualism that has often characterized certain strands of Protestant identity by re-centering the believer within networks of relational belonging. Modern psychology consistently demonstrates that human flourishing depends on secure attachment, communal resonance, and shared moral frameworks rather than isolated cognitive autonomy. Jonathan Haidt's research shows that individuals reason, interpret,

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Theory, Ritual Practice, 82. Within Protestant thought, Smith applies these anthropological insights to Christian worship, arguing that liturgical practices shape the imagination and desires of believers, forming a communal interpretive posture that precedes doctrinal articulation; see *Desiring the Kingdom*, 67.

[239] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 67

[240] Gregory of Nazianzus. *Orations*. Translated by Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 7. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.

and even moralize *with* and *through* their groups, not apart from them. In other words, belonging provides the emotional grounding that enables openness, flexibility, and empathy.[241] When believers understand themselves as embedded in a relational environment (rather than as solitary interpreters "armed" only with private conscience) they in turn gain psychological stability that reduces defensiveness and mitigates the anxiety that fuels rigid, individualistic postures. Thus, the communal interpretation is not just a theological correction along, but also a psychologically healing one for it restores the social bonds that regulate emotion, expand perspective, and cultivate the humility necessary for mature engagement with both Scripture and tradition.

Augustine's *Confessions* deepen this insight by portraying the human self as fundamentally relational and healed only within the bonds of communion. For example, in Book VIII, Augustine describes his own conversion not as a solitary intellectual breakthrough but as an experience made possible through the presence, prayers, and companionship of others (such as Ambrose, Simplicianus, Alypius, and the wider Church whose witness surrounded him). For Augustine, the self is wounded by disordered love and fragmentation, and its restoration requires reintegration into the communal life of God and one's neighbor. Healing thus occurs as the individual is drawn out of the isolating curvature of the self (*incurvatus in se*) and into the shared life of the ecclesial community where love is rightly ordered and the soul learns to desire God in harmony with others.[242] Therefore, *Confessions* presents conversion and healing not as private achievements but as relational events, revealing that the self becomes whole only through participation in a community shaped by divine love.[243] It is in this fashion that recognition becomes a psychological posture of relational integration.

Sociological

From the sociological perspective, this recognition counters the centrifugal tendencies that have long contributed to Protestant fragmentation by reasserting the necessity of visible,

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[241] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 89.

[242] For Augustine, the difference between disordered and ordered love lies in the orientation of desire. Disordered love occurs when the heart clings to created goods as if they were ultimate (i.e., loving the right things in the wrong way or in the wrong order) which in turn fragments the self and turns it inward upon itself. By congtrast ordered love aligns desire with the hierarchy of goods God has established in the following way: God is loved above all, others are loved in God, and temporal goods are enjoyed rightly and without possessiveness. In this alignment the self becomes integrated, peaceful, and capable of genuine communion, because its loves are directed toward their proper ends rather than distorting the soul through misplaced attachment.

[243] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, VIII.

communal unity. More modern Protestant ecclesiology increasingly acknowledges that the increase of isolated interpretive communities in which each is guided primarily by individual conscience, has in fact weakened the Church's collective witness and eroded its social coherence. Mark Noll, for example, argues that evangelicalism in particular has suffered from an overly individualistic intellectual and ecclesial culture that has often neglected the formative power of shared institutions, common practices, and corporate discernment.[244] By stressing the need for unity, contemporary Protestant thinkers seek to rebuild the relational and institutional bonds that sustain a coherent communal identity. Therefore, this sociological shift recognizes that the Church's interpretive life is strengthened when believers are embedded in stable structures of accountability, shared memory, and common mission (structures that mitigate fragmentation and cultivate a more integrated, resilient ecclesial body).

The early Church's conciliar model supplements this insight by offering a concrete historical template for shared discernment. As J. N. D. Kelly notes, the Church addressed doctrinal disputes not through private judgment but through councils in which bishops gathered to deliberate, pray, and interpret Scripture together.[245] These assemblies (whether in the form of local synods or universal ecumenical councils) embodied the conviction that truth is clarified through communal reasoning under the guidance of the Spirit. Thus the conciliar process served to function as a structured form of corporate interpretation, therefore ensuring that doctrinal decisions emerged from the collective wisdom, memory, and accountability of the whole Church rather than from isolated individuals. In the early centuries of Christendom, we can see that the early councils provided a precedent for contemporary Protestant efforts to recover shared discernment and while at the same time resisting the fragmentation that accompanies purely individualistic approaches to Scripture.

2.2 Reconciliation With Tradition

Theological

Contemporary Protestant theology increasingly reclaims tradition as a resource (instead of a rival to Scripture) but it does so as a hermeneutical companion that enriches the interpretive task thus situating the believer within a broader historical community. This retrieval reflects a growing

[244] Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 55.
[245] Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 67.

recognition that the original Reformers themselves never actually intended a rupture with the Church's past but rather they sought to purify and renew it. Thus, contemporary Protestant theologians increasingly view the early councils, patristic exegesis, and liturgical practices as indispensable witnesses to the gospel rather than as additions to be discounted or discarded. This shift also arises from an awareness that a purely individual or *ahistorical* reading of Scripture is neither theologically sustainable nor psychologically stable, for it isolates the believer from the communal memory and history that shapes Christian identity. As McGrath notes regarding the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, it was never meant to imply *solo scriptura,* i.e., a Scripture that is severed from the interpretive wisdom of the Church,[246] but rather Scripture as the normative authority interpreted within the living tradition of faith.[247] In this light the Protestant retrieval of tradition represents not a capitulation to Catholic dogma or ecclesiology, but rather a maturation of Protestant self-understanding which acknowledges the formative power of historical continuity, the necessity of communal discernment, and the theological fruitfulness of engaging the Church's inherited practices and doctrinal reflections. Thus, tradition is not inherently corrupt, but instead it acts as a witness to the Gospel.

Vincent of Lérins offers additional insight with criteria for discerning authentic tradition, and his *Commonitorium* (especially in its widely used critical editions) has become one of the most frequently cited patristic sources for articulating how the Church distinguishes genuine apostolic inheritance from later distortions. Writing in the fifth century amid doctrinal turbulence, Vincent proposed what has come to be known as the Vincentian Canon: that true Christian doctrine is what

[246] *Sola scriptura* and *solo scriptura* name two very different postures toward biblical authority, even though they are often confused in popular discourse. *Sola scriptura*, the classical Reformation principle, affirms Scripture as the Church's supreme and final norm while simultaneously acknowledging the indispensable role of tradition, communal discernment, and the historical witness of the saints in guiding interpretation. It presumes that the Holy Spirit forms the Church across time and that the believer reads Scripture most faithfully when situated within this living, communal memory. *Solo scriptura*, is a modern, hyper-individualistic distortion that isolates the reader from the Church's interpretive heritage and treats Scripture as if it must be understood privately, without the corrective or illuminative presence of tradition. Where *sola scriptura* reflects a theologically grounded confidence that Scripture and tradition operate in a mutually enriching relationship (i.e., Scripture norming tradition, tradition guiding interpretation, or to put it another way: Scripture has the final say, but tradition helps us understand what Scripture says), *solo scriptura* reflects an anxious defensiveness that equates community with constraint and elevates personal autonomy into a hermeneutical principle. Psychologically, the former corresponds to a secure Protestant identity capable of receiving the past as a gift, while the latter mirrors the R.I.G.I.D. pattern this research paper identifies: a retreat into isolation, suspicion, and interpretive absolutism born from fear rather than theological conviction.

[247] McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 89.

has been believed *"everywhere, always, and by all"* (*ubique, semper, et ab omnibus*).[248] This triadic formula does not function as a rigid historical checklist but as a theological investigative for identifying the continuity of the Church's faith across geography, time, and communal consensus. In its most popular modern editions, the *Commonitorium* emphasizes that authentic tradition is recognized through catholicity (its presence across the universal Church), antiquity (its rootedness in the earliest Christian witness), and consensus (its reception by the faithful and the bishops over generations). Vincent's aim was *not to elevate tradition above Scripture* but to provide a disciplined method for discerning how the Church has rightly interpreted Scripture throughout its history. His criteria thus reinforce the dynamic relationship that is being described in this research paper: Scripture norms tradition, yet tradition guides interpretation by preserving the Church's collective memory of how Scripture has been faithfully understood. Therefore, Vincent's canon serves as a stabilizing hermeneutical tool which guards against both innovation that departs from apostolic teaching and hyper-individualistic readings that detach the believer from the Church's historical and communal wisdom (this patristic insight reinforces the contemporary emphasis on tradition as a guide).

Anthropological

Here, reconciliation reclaims liturgy, symbol, and historical memory by restoring the communal practices through which a people narrate their identity and inhabit a shared moral world. Contemporary liturgical studies emphasize that ritual is not just expressive but formative (it shapes perception, desire, and belonging at a pre-reflective level, embedding individuals within a symbolic universe that precedes and sustains them).[249] Jean Leclercq's classic insight that monastic culture united "the love of learning and the desire for God" underscores this dynamic, for he shows that liturgical life forms a habitus in which theological meaning is absorbed through repeated

[248] Vincent of Lérins. *The Commonitorium*. Translated by Rudolph E. Morris, *Ancient Christian Writers* 7. (New York: Newman Press, 1949), articulates the canon *ubique, semper, et ab omnibus* as the criterion for authentic tradition.

[249] For the formative nature of ritual, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966); Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984); Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1963); James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

gestures, chants, and rhythms rather than through abstract propositions alone.[250] This reconciliation requires more than doctrinal agreement for it demands the healing of the ritual body, the recovery of shared symbols, and the re-appropriation of historical memory that has been fragmented by conflict. When communities return to the practices that once shaped them (e.g., common prayer, shared feasts, the retelling of sacred history, etc.) they re-enter the symbolic world that makes communion imaginable. Ritual then becomes a site of anthropological repair when it re-orders the imagination, re-binds the community, and re-inscribes a narrative of belonging that counters the alienation produced by division. Through this lens, reconciliation is not simply negotiated but embodied being enacted through the very practices that once formed the Church's unity.

Medieval monastic practices add to this by offering models of disciplined spiritual formation, providing a concrete anthropology of how the human person is shaped through habitual patterns of prayer, asceticism, and communal life. John Cassian's *Conferences*, especially in the widely used Luibheid translation, illustrate how early monastic wisdom understood spiritual growth as the slow, deliberate reordering of desire through practices that train attention, regulate emotion, and cultivate interior stability. Cassian describes the monk's daily rhythm (psalmody, silence, manual labor, fasting, and the continual examination of thoughts) as a school of the heart in which the soul is gradually healed of disordered passions and re-aligned toward God.[251] These practices are not mere moral disciplines but anthropological interventions in that they reshape the monk's perceptual world, attune the body to the rhythms of prayer, and embed the individual within a communal memory that sustains identity across time. Viewed in this fashion, monastic formation anticipates contemporary insights in psychology and ritual theory by recognizing that transformation occurs not primarily through intellectual instruction but through embodied repetition that forms stable dispositions. Cassian's account actually provides a historical precedent for understanding reconciliation and spiritual maturity as processes rooted in disciplined practice, affective regulation, and the cultivation of virtues that make communion possible, and thus reconciliation thus becomes an anthropological posture of embodied memory.

Psychological

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[250] Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 33.

[251] Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid, II

From the psychological perspective, reconciliation reduces purity anxiety by diminishing the internal tension that arises when one's identity feels threatened by difference. Modern psychology demonstrates that fear, especially fear of cognitive or moral contamination, drives individuals and groups to police boundaries with increasing rigidity. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance shows that when people encounter information or communities that challenge their established beliefs, they experience a form of psychological discomfort that the mind instinctively seeks to resolve.[252] One common resolution strategy is boundary fortification: tightening doctrinal, moral, or communal lines in order to protect the self from perceived inconsistency or impurity. In confessional contexts, this manifests as heightened vigilance toward theological difference, suspicion of alternative practices, and an exaggerated emphasis on purity markers that signal loyalty to the in-group. In contrast, reconciliation tends to lower the threat level and reframes the "other" not as a contaminant but as a partner in discernment, thereby reducing the dissonance that fuels defensive rigidity. Therefore, as fear diminishes, the psyche becomes capable of tolerating ambiguity, engaging difference with curiosity, and relaxing the purity-based mechanisms that once served as psychological armor.[253]

Thomas Aquinas demonstrates this by describing tradition as the Church's memory, essential for identity, grounding the community in a stable inheritance that shapes both belief and practice. In his *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q.49, he treats the virtue of *memoria* as a component of prudence and argues that memory is not just the recollection of past events but a habitual disposition that enables right judgment, continuity, and fidelity over time.[254] When this insight is applied ecclesially, tradition functions as the Church's collective *memoria* in the form of the cultivated capacity to remember God's saving acts, the teachings handed down from the apostles, and the lived wisdom of the saints. This memory is not static but dynamic, it is an active retention that allows the Church to discern faithfully in the present by remaining anchored in what has been received in the past. Thus, tradition becomes the stabilizing horizon within which Christian identity is formed, preserved, and transmitted. Yet, without this shared memory, the Church would lose the very narrative coherence that makes it a community rather than a collection of isolated interpreters.[255] Aquinas thus provides a metaphysical and moral foundation for understanding

[252] Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, 93.
[253] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 3-7, 121-24.
[254] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.49.
[255] Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, 25-32.

tradition as the Church's ongoing act of remembering, a practice essential for maintaining continuity with its origins and for cultivating the prudential wisdom necessary to navigate new circumstances without severing the bonds of identity. In sum, reconciliation thus becomes a psychological posture of secure identity.

Sociological

In the view of sociology, reconciliation fosters stability by reducing the internal fragmentation and boundary anxiety that often arise when communities define themselves primarily through opposition. When hostility diminishes and mutual recognition increases, groups experience a greater sense of coherence, predictability, and shared purpose, conditions of which sociologists identify as essential for long-term institutional resilience. Modern ecclesiology reinforces this dynamic by emphasizing unity in diversity, the conviction that genuine communion does not require uniformity but rather the capacity to hold difference within a shared relational and sacramental life. This vision aligns with Christian Smith's analysis of religious communities, which shows that groups capable of integrating internal diversity without collapsing into relativism or schism tend to be more stable, adaptive, and missionally effective.[256] In this framework, reconciliation becomes both a sociological good as well as a theological one for it strengthens the social body by lowering threat perception, expanding relational networks, and cultivating the trust necessary for collaborative discernment. A reconciled community is therefore not only more peaceful but more durable, because it possesses the structural and relational flexibility to navigate change without fracturing.

Patristic conciliar practices enhance this by demonstrating how early Christians navigated disagreement without schism. Far from being just a type of administrative gatherings, the early councils embodied a theological-anthropological commitment to communal discernment, a psychological posture of humility before the mystery of God, and a sociological mechanism for preserving unity amid diversity. The conciliar method assumed that truth was best discerned not through isolated reasoning or unilateral authority but through a communal process of listening, disputation, prayer, and mutual correction. This pattern is evident as early as the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), where apostolic leaders engaged in vigorous debate yet refused to allow disagreement to fracture communion. Later councils (e.g., Nicaea 325CE, Constantinople 381CE,

[256] Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 91.

and Chalcedon 451CE) continued this pattern by gathering bishops from diverse regions, theological schools, and cultural contexts to deliberate over contested doctrines.[257] Their method was neither authoritarian imposition nor democratic relativism but a disciplined process of *synodality*, in which the Church sought the mind of Christ through collective discernment. These councils can be seen functioning anthropologically as ritualized forms of conflict resolution, creating a symbolic and procedural space in which disagreement could be expressed without threatening the integrity of the community. Psychologically, they modeled a secure attachment to tradition in that the Church could face doctrinal ambiguity without collapsing into fear-driven rigidity because it trusted that the Holy Spirit guided the communal body rather than isolated individuals. Sociologically one can see how conciliar practices reinforced the Church's identity as a trans-local communion whose unity did not depend on uniformity but on shared participation in a deliberative, Spirit-guided process. As J. N. D. Kelly points out, the conciliar tradition reveals that early Christian leaders understood doctrinal development as a communal task requiring patience, charity, and a willingness to hold tension without immediate rupture.[258] Overall, the early

[257] A note on Chalcedon: Patristic scholars frequently identify the Council of Chalcedon (451CE) as the first major and enduring schism in Christian history because it produced not only a doctrinal definition but a rupture in communion that crystallized along lines of culture, language, and collective memory. The Chalcedonian formula (affirming Christ as one person in two natures) was intended as a mediating synthesis, yet many Eastern Christian communities, especially in Egypt, Syria, and Armenia, experienced it as a threat to their theological identity and as an imperial imposition upon their local ecclesial life. Therefore, their rejection of the council was not reducible to a single doctrinal disagreement but it rather reflected a deeper convergence of theological imagination, ritual culture, and political marginalization. Hence, Chalcedon exemplifies the very dynamics this paper seeks to illuminate: theological conflict becoming schism only when intensified by anthropological attachments, psychological threat responses, and sociological pressures. Theologically, the dispute reflected divergent symbolic worlds shaped by different Christological emphases; anthropologically, it disrupted long-standing liturgical and monastic traditions; psychologically, it activated patterns of fear, identity protection, and boundary fortification; and sociologically, it became entangled with ethnic identity and resistance to imperial authority. Thus, Chalcedon functions as an early historical case study of the Fear → Fixation → Ferocity trajectory and the R.I.G.I.D. schema, demonstrating that confessional rigidity arises may arise from doctrinal content but from a deeper level from the interplay of trauma, belonging, and perceived threat. By situating Chalcedon within the TAPS framework, the present study shows that the roots of confessional antagonism long predate the Reformation and that the same mechanisms that fractured the fifth-century Church continue to shape Catholic-Protestant identity today.

[258] Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 89. Kelly's analysis makes clear that the Church's conciliar tradition, while theologically guided, remains historically conditioned and therefore vulnerable to the full range of human limitations. He consistently affirms that councils are genuine instruments of doctrinal clarification, yet he refuses to romanticize the processes by which their definitions emerge. For example, in his treatment of Chalcedon (pp. 327-345) and the events leading to it (pp. 310-327), Kelly explicitly acknowledges that political pressures, linguistic misunderstandings, regional rivalries, and pastoral miscalculations all contributed to the council's fraught reception and the enduring schism that followed. The very fact that Chalcedon produced both a doctrinally balanced Christological formula and a rupture in communion illustrates, for Kelly, the paradox of conciliar history in that the Holy Spirit safeguards the truth of the faith, but the human agents who articulate that truth remain susceptible to error, fear, ambition, and cultural myopia. Thus, Chalcedon becomes a paradigmatic instance of how the Church's pursuit of doctrinal fidelity can be entangled with (and at times distorted by) the contingencies of human nature. Far from

patristic councils offer a historical precedent for resisting confessional rigidity by demonstrating that when approached with humility and communal trust, it does not necessarily need to lead to fragmentation but can instead become a catalyst for deeper unity.

2.3. Renewal of Interpretive Charity

Theological

Contemporary hermeneutics emphasizes charity as a guiding interpretive principle in ways far more structurally significant than a simple appeal to kindness. Charity instead functions as a methodological virtue that shapes how interpreters engage *texts*, *textualists* (authors), *traditions*, and *together* (one another). Scholar N.T. Wright argues that charitable interpretation is indispensable for reading Scripture within the economy of God's self-communication because it resists the distortions introduced by suspicion, defensiveness, or ideological rigidity[259] (keeping in mind that within the Christian theological tradition, God's ultimate self-communication is understood to be love). Charity toward the *text* begins with the presumption that Scripture speaks meaningfully and coherently within its historical, literary, and theological contexts, inviting patient, attentive, and *contextually informed reading* rather than premature judgment or reductionistic critique.[260] Charity toward the *textualist* (author) and *tradition* extends this posture by acknowledging the intentions, symbolic worlds, and pedagogical aims of biblical writers and the communities that preserved their writings, aligning with patristic insights from Augustine, Chrysostom, and Gregory the Great, who insisted that humility, patience, and a willingness to learn are essential dispositions for approaching Scripture. Charity toward the interpretive community recognizes that Scripture's authority is exercised within the life of the Church, requiring interpreters to assume good faith in others, seek understanding rather than victory, and prioritize ecclesial unity over the triumph of personal interpretive preferences.[261] Within the broader argument of this research, hermeneutical charity becomes a crucial antidote to confessional rigidity

undermining the legitimacy of conciliar teaching, this recognition underscores the need for humility, historical awareness, and interpretive charity when assessing the councils' outcomes and their long-term ecclesial consequences.

[259] Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 14.

[260] Reductionist critique, when applied to Scripture, refers to an interpretive approach that collapses the richness, complexity, and multilayered nature of the biblical text into a single, overly narrow explanatory category, thereby reducing the text to less than what it actually is. It is not a single method per se, but rather a *posture*, i.e., a way of reading that strips Scripture of its theological depth, literary sophistication, historical texture, and spiritual intent. In sum, reductionism explains the text *away* rather than explaining the text.

[261] Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 14.

for if rigidity arises from fear, identity threat, and defensive postures, then charity functions as a spiritual-intellectual discipline that interrupts these dynamics by cultivating humility, curiosity, and the capacity to hold ambiguity without collapsing into anxiety or aggression. In this context, charity is not simply an interpretive technique but a formative practice that shapes the inner life of the interpreter, enabling the kind of mature, grounded engagement across difference that the TAPS framework identifies as essential for healing confessional antagonism.

Anthropological

From the anthropological view renewal cultivates practices of hospitality and shared discernment because human meaning-making is never a solitary act but a fundamentally social process embedded in ritual, symbol, and communal interaction.[262] Contemporary anthropology underscores that interpretation arises within a cultural environment in which people learn how to perceive, categorize, and respond to the world through shared practices rather than isolated cognition. For example, Douglas's analysis of purity systems demonstrates that communities construct and maintain meaning through collective patterns of boundary-making, symbolic exchange, and ritual participation, all of which shape how members interpret both texts and experiences.[263] In this light, hospitality becomes more than a moral virtue it is also an interpretive posture that welcomes the perspectives, stories, and insights of others, which in turn expands the community's symbolic world and loosens rigid boundaries that often arise from fear or perceived threat. Similarly, shared discernment reflects the anthropological insight that understanding is negotiated within a communal processes through conversation, ritual participation, and the mutual testing of interpretations within a *trusted social body*. Therefore, renewal at the anthropological level involves a re-forming of the communal structures that make interpretation possible, fostering

[262] Human meaning-making refers to the shared cultural process through which communities interpret reality, construct significance, and organize experience using common symbols, rituals, and narratives. For example, a community's shared rituals such as gathering for worship, celebrating festivals, or practicing table fellowship all teach members what matters, how to relate to one another, and how to interpret events within a common symbolic world.

[263] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 121. Douglas draws out the point that people learn what "counts," what "fits," and what "feels right" within their community by watching how the group draws lines, shares symbols, and performs rituals together. For example, a church that treats certain foods, clothes, or worship styles as "proper" or "improper" is not just enforcing rules, it is also teaching its members how to see the world, how to categorize people and practices, and how to interpret Scripture through those shared assumptions. A simple illustration would be a congregation where everyone dresses formally on Sunday, in which over time members begin to associate reverence with formal clothing, so when they read biblical passages about holiness or worship, they instinctively interpret them through that cultural lens. In this way, everyday practices such as who sits where, what is considered clean or unclean, which behaviors are praised or frowned upon, all quietly train people in how to understand both their sacred texts and their lived experiences.

environments where meaning is co-created, boundaries are held with *humility* rather than *hostility*, and the community learns to interpret both Scripture and experience together rather than in isolation.

Medieval monastic *lectio divina* shows this by modeling a form of communal, *non-compet*itive reading in which Scripture is approached not as a text to be mastered but as a shared space of encounter, humility, and mutual transformation. Leclercq notes that monastic reading was fundamentally non-rivalrous explaining that monks did not read to outperform one another, to generate novel interpretations, or to assert intellectual dominance over others, but on the contrary to *listen together* for the voice of God speaking through the text.[264] In this historical monastic setting reading became an act of hospitality by welcoming the *Canon* (Word), welcoming the *community*, and welcoming the slow, patient rhythms of *contemplation*. The practice unfolded in stages (reading, meditation, prayer, contemplation),[265] each of which assumed that understanding emerges through *communal attentiveness* rather than *competitive argumentation*. This communal posture trained monks to relinquish the impulse to control or conquer the text, cultivating instead a receptive, dialogical stance in which meaning was discerned collectively. Through this process *lectio divina* embodied an interpretive ethos that resisted the reduction of Scripture to information or debate, modeling a way of reading grounded in humility, listening, and the shared pursuit of wisdom. In short, renewal thus becomes an anthropological posture of shared inquiry.[266]

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[264] Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, 55.

[265] In *lectio divina*, these four movements are distinct yet intentionally sequential and accumulative, each building upon the previous stage to deepen the encounter with Scripture. Reading (*lectio*) begins the process by attending carefully to the words of the text, receiving them slowly and without haste for this is the stage of *hearing*. Meditation (*meditatio*) follows by turning those words over in the mind and heart, exploring their resonances, connections, and invitations and is the stage of *pondering*. Prayer (*oratio*) emerges naturally from meditation as the reader responds to God with petition, gratitude, confession, or longing and is the stage of *speaking back*. Contemplation (*contemplatio*) completes the sequence by moving beyond words into a quiet, receptive resting in God's presence, the stage of *being with*. The process is accumulative because each movement presupposes and deepens the one before it. Reading provides the raw material for meditation, meditation awakens the heart for prayer, and prayer disposes the soul for contemplation. Rather than four isolated techniques, they form a single, unfolding path in which understanding grows into affection, affection into communion, and communion into transformation.

[266] *Lectio divina* is more communal than individual because each stage depends on the shared life of the community. Reading was done aloud so everyone heard the same Word together; meditation unfolded within the common rhythms, symbols, and practices that shaped how the community thought; prayer joined each person's response to the community's ongoing intercession; and contemplation was supported by the stability, silence, and mutual presence of the group. Even when interior, the practice was carried by a shared environment, making interpretation a collective, relational act rather than an isolated one.

Psychological

In a psychological perspective, interpretive charity replaces suspicion with curiosity by shifting the mind out of a threat-based posture and into an open, exploratory mode of engagement with others. Modern psychology describes this shift as cognitive flexibility which is the capacity for one to move beyond rigid, defensive interpretations and to consider multiple possibilities *without collapsing into anxiety or hostility*. Beck argues that suspicion is a hallmark of cognitive rigidity for when individuals feel threatened (e.g., socially, emotionally, ideologically) they default to narrow, absolutized interpretations that confirm their fears and protect their identity.[267] A healthy curiosity, on the other hand, signals a nervous system that feels safe enough to explore rather than defend. Thus, it widens the interpretive field and allows one's mind to entertain nuance, alternative explanations, and the possibility of goodwill in the other person. Thus, interpretive charity goes beyond being just a moral virtue but also includes it as a psychological skill for in this sense it trains the mind to *arrest* (pause) before *assuming* harm, to *ask* questions rather than make *accusations*, and to *approach* difference with openness rather than *alarm*. Therefore, cognitive flexibility becomes the psychological engine of charity that in turn enables readers to hold ambiguity, revise assumptions, and engage both texts and people with a posture of *humility* and *receptivity* rather than *hostility* (fear) and *reactivity*.

Gregory the Great provides insight by teaching that Scripture "grows with the reader," meaning that its depths unfold as the reader becomes more spiritually receptive. In the *Moralia in Job*, he emphasizes that understanding increases not because the text changes but because the reader does as evidenced by humility, virtue, and openness expanding one's capacity to perceive what the text has always held.[268] For Gregory, interpretation is a moral and spiritual process (i.e., Scripture discloses more to those willing to be formed by it). This perspective invites humility, reminding interpreters that insight is received rather than mastered and that growth in understanding accompanies growth in holiness. Thus, in short, renewal becomes a psychological posture of openness.

Sociological

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[267] Beck, *Prisoners of Hate*, 44.

[268] Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job (Moralia in Job)*, trans. John Henry Parker, vol. 1 (London: John Henry Parker, 1844; repr., Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 29.

Finally, from the sociological perspective, renewal strengthens ecumenical relationships by fostering patterns of interaction in which Christian communities learn to receive from one another rather than compete for doctrinal or institutional superiority. Ecumenical theology emphasizes that genuine unity does not emerge from one tradition trying to master or correct another, but rather from mutual learning where each community acknowledges its own limits and remains open to the gifts, insights, and corrective wisdom present in others. Murray's framework of *receptive ecumenism* captures this dynamic by arguing that the most fruitful ecumenical posture is not "What can others learn from us?" but rather "What do we need to learn from them for our own healing and growth?"[269] This shift reframes ecumenical engagement as a sociological practice of humility, vulnerability, and shared discernment, where traditions strengthen their relationships by recognizing interdependence rather than asserting self-sufficiency. Hence, we can see how renewal becomes a communal process in which churches deepen their bonds through the exchange of wisdom, the acknowledgment of difference, and the *shared pursuit* of greater faithfulness.

As has been previously noted, the early Church's conciliar tradition shows us that interpretation was never meant to be the task of isolated individuals but a responsibility borne by the whole community. Ecumenical councils gathered bishops, theologians, and representatives from across the Christian world to discern together how Scripture should be understood in moments of doctrinal conflict or pastoral uncertainty. Kelly notes that this conciliar process assumed that no single leader or local church possessed the fullness of insight. Instead, truth emerged through collective deliberation, mutual correction, and the testing of interpretations within the wider body.[270] Thus, the councils modeled an interpretive ethos grounded in humility and shared accountability in which Scripture was read in conversation, doctrine was clarified through consensus, and the Church's teaching authority was exercised as a communal rather than a solitary endeavor. This tradition reinforces the idea that faithful interpretation requires listening across difference, submitting personal readings to communal wisdom, and recognizing that the Spirit speaks most clearly when the Church discerns together (and, so the process of renewal becomes a sociological posture of mutual cooperation).

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[269] Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, 3.
[270] Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 89.

3. Shared Markers of Spiritual Maturity

Across traditions, spiritual maturity converges in the G.R.A.C.E. framework.

Grounded Identity: Security In God

Modern psychology emphasizes secure identity as the foundation for healthy engagement, and this insight provides a natural bridge to the theological claim that true stability is ultimately found in God. Van der Kolk's research shows that when a person's internal world is marked by safety and coherence, the nervous system remains regulated rather than reactive, allowing for openness, curiosity, and relational presence.[271] In theological terms, this mirrors the spiritual security that arises from grounding one's identity in God's unwavering love and faithful character. A self that is anchored in divine stability is less vulnerable to fear-based defensiveness because its worth is not contingent on external validation or threatened by difference. Therefore, the neurobiological safety described by van der Kolk and the spiritual safety described by the Christian tradition converge in a harmonious way for both free the person from survival-driven patterns of rigidity and enable a posture of calm, grounded engagement. Security in God becomes the deepest form of grounded identity, integrating psychological regulation with theological assurance and allowing the believer to encounter others without anxiety, hostility, or the need to protect a fragile self.[272]

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[271] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* , 31.

[272] Security in God becomes the deepest form of grounded identity because Scripture, Christian philosophical anthropology, and the theological tradition all converge on a single claim: the human person is most stable, most integrated, and most fully themselves when their identity is rooted in the unchanging character of God rather than in contingent, fragile, or socially constructed sources of worth. Each discipline names this truth in its own register, but the underlying logic is the same: only what is eternal can secure what is vulnerable because the human person, by nature, is marked by fragility, contingency, and dependence. Everything finite (e.g., health, reputation, relationships, institutions, achievements, even one's own psychological stability, etc.) is subject to change, loss, and decay. When a

As far back as the fourth-century, Athanasius grounding identity in union with Christ, insisting that the human person discovers their true stability not through self-assertion but through participation in the divine life.[273] For Athanasius, the Incarnation is more than just a redemptive event, it is also an ontological reorientation in that by assuming human nature, the Word restores humanity to its proper grounding in God, healing the fragmentation introduced by sin and death. Thus, human identity is not autonomous or self-generated, but rather it is derivative, relational, and secured through communion with the One who is the source of life itself. In Athanasius's vision, union with Christ re-anchors the self in the eternal Logos, providing a stability that no earthly or psychological foundation can match. This union integrates the person at every level (intellect, desire, and will) because it reconnects humanity to the divine image in which it was created. Thus, Athanasius offers a theological grounding for identity that parallels modern psychological insights, that is, just as secure attachment provides the basis for emotional regulation and relational openness, union with Christ provides the deepest and most enduring form of grounded identity, rooting the vulnerable human self in the unchanging life of God. [274] In short, grounded identity becomes a theological, psychological, and sociological anchor.

Receptive Posture: Humility

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vulnerable self attempts to anchor its identity in something equally vulnerable, the result is inevitable instability, i.e., the fragile cannot bear the weight of the fragile. Scripture names this dynamic repeatedly, contrasting the shifting sands of human foundations with the unshakeable character of God. Philosophically, this reflects the classical insight that finite goods cannot provide ultimate grounding because they lack permanence (they are good, but not *ultimate*). In a theological view the human person is created for communion with the eternal God, and therefore only participation in God's unchanging life can provide the depth of security the heart seeks. In this sense, the eternal is more than just longer-lasting, it is qualitatively different, possessing the stability, fidelity, and constancy that vulnerable creatures require in order to flourish. In sum, only what is eternal can secure what is vulnerable because only the eternal possesses the permanence, reliability, and ontological weight capable of holding the fragile human self without fear of collapse.

[273] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.

[274] God is understood to be both eternal and necessary, and therefore the source of all life, because only a being whose existence is uncaused, unchanging, and self-sustaining can ground the existence of everything else. Classical metaphysics argues that anything subject to change, decay, or contingency cannot serve as the ultimate explanation for reality, since what is mutable depends on something beyond itself to account for its becoming. By contrast, God is conceived as pure actuality (i.e., without potential, without beginning, and without the possibility of non-existence) which means that God's being is not received but intrinsic. A necessary being cannot fail to exist, and an eternal being cannot come into or pass out of existence, and so therefore, such a being alone can serve as the ontological foundation for all that is finite and dependent. From this perspective, God is not just one being among others but rather the very ground of being itself, the One in whom existence is not possessed but identical with essence. Because all created life is contingent (i.e., deriving its existence moment by moment from a source beyond itself) it must ultimately depend on the One whose life is self-existent and inexhaustible. In short, God is eternal because God is necessary, and God is necessary because God is the source of all life, the unchanging foundation upon which the fragile and finite world rests.

Modern theology emphasizes receptive ecumenism, a paradigm that shifts the focus of inter-church engagement from defending one's own tradition to discerning what one's tradition might *receive* from others as a gift.[275] Rather than approaching ecumenical dialogue as a negotiation of doctrinal concessions or a search for the "lowest-common-denominator" agreement, receptive ecumenism invites each community to ask where it is wounded, limited, or incomplete, and how the wisdom of another tradition might contribute to its healing and growth. This approach reframes ecumenism as an act of *humility* and *honesty* rather than *competition* or *comparison*. It assumes that the Holy Spirit is at work across the Body of Christ in diverse ways and that genuine unity emerges not through uniformity but through mutual learning. Receptive ecumenism aligns theologically with a vision of the Church as a communion of gifts, where each tradition bears particular strengths and charisms that can enrich the others. Hence, psychologically it requires a secure identity capable of receiving critique without defensiveness while ecclesially it encourages traditions to move beyond polemical and argumentative positions and toward a shared pilgrimage marked by curiosity, vulnerability, and the willingness to be transformed through encounter.

Patristic sources, going back to the early, ancient time of Christendom and on through to the height of Scholasticism emphasize this with the virtue of docility[276], described by both Basil and Aquinas as essential for wisdom. For Basil, docility is the cultivated readiness to be taught; a disposition that resists the pride of self-sufficiency and instead embraces the formative guidance of the Spirit through Scripture, community, and spiritual elders.[277] He frames teachability not as passivity but as an active, disciplined openness that allows the believer to be shaped, corrected, and matured. Aquinas later develops this insight by identifying docility as a key component of *prudentia*, the virtue that enables right judgment. Because no one possesses all knowledge or experience, Aquinas argues that the wise person must be willing to learn from others, receiving counsel with humility and discernment.[278] It is thus docility that becomes the moral and intellectual

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[275] Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, 3. In short, Murray defines receptive ecumenism as an approach in which each Christian tradition asks not *"What can others learn from us?"* but rather *"What do we need to learn from others in order to be more fully ourselves?"* It is a posture of humble, self-critical openness in which churches seek healing and growth by receiving the gifts, insights, and strengths present in other traditions, trusting that the Spirit works across the whole Body of Christ.

[276] Docility and humility are deeply related and mutually reinforcing because they describe two dimensions of the same interior posture: the willingness to be taught and the freedom from the pride that resists being taught. They work together to create the kind of receptive, spacious self that can grow in wisdom.

[277] Basil the Great, *The Longer Rules*, trans. M. Wagner (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 26.

[278] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.49

posture that makes genuine wisdom possible for it frees the person from the illusion of self-mastery and opens them to the gifts, insights, and corrections that come through the wider Body of Christ. Here we see how patristic and scholastic voices together reinforce the theological claim that receptivity is not weakness but the very condition for growth, maturity, and spiritual discernment. Therefore, receptivity becomes a necessary posture of openness to the Spirit.

Attentive Discernment: Discernment

Contemporary discernment theory integrates reason, tradition, and experience, drawing these three sources into a unified process of wise judgment. Lonergan argues that authentic understanding emerges through a dynamic interplay of attentive inquiry, critical reflection, and responsible action, as opposed to any single epistemic source.[279] Reason provides the analytical clarity needed to evaluate motives, consequences, and internal coherence[280] while tradition offers the accumulated wisdom of the community (e.g., its practices, doctrines, and narratives) which then serves as a stabilizing horizon against which individual insights are tested. Experience contributes the concrete, lived reality of the person, to include affective responses, intuitions, and the subtle movements of conscience.[281] For Lonergan, discernment becomes a disciplined pattern

[279] Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 589.

[280] By enabling the person to step back from immediate impulses and examine a situation with disciplined attentiveness, reason allows one to distinguish between surface desires and deeper intentions, to assess whether an action aligns with one's values, and to anticipate the likely outcomes of different choices. Reason also tests the internal coherence of a proposed judgment (e.g., whether it fits within a broader pattern of truth, tradition, and lived experience). In discernment, this rational clarity does not function as some kind of cold calculation but as a form of intellectual honesty in which it illuminates hidden assumptions, exposes contradictions, and brings order to the complex interplay of emotion, intuition, and desire. Thus, reason becomes the stabilizing element that ensures discernment is not driven by impulse or bias but grounded in a thoughtful, integrated pursuit of not only the good, but also the true and the beautiful. In the classical Christian and philosophical tradition these three (*the transcendentals*) are inseparable dimensions of reality. When reason evaluates *convictions* (motives), *consequences*, and *coherence*, it is ultimately discerning whether a proposed action aligns with truth (what is real), goodness (what promotes flourishing), and beauty (what harmonizes with the order of creation). The good cannot be separated from the true, because an action that contradicts reality cannot genuinely promote flourishing. Likewise, the beautiful is not just aesthetic pleasure but the radiance of truth and goodness made perceptible. Thus, in discernment, reason becomes the faculty that helps the person perceive and respond to all three transcendentals at once, ensuring that judgment is not just morally sound but also intellectually honest and spiritually attuned to the deeper harmony of God's creation.

[281] The subtle movements of conscience are the quiet, interior shifts by which a person becomes aware of moral truth, i.e., small stirrings of attraction toward what is good, gentle unease in the face of misalignment, and the dawning clarity or peace that accompanies a choice consistent with one's deepest commitments. These movements are not dramatic impulses but fine-grained perceptions that arise when the heart is attentive to the interplay of reason, desire, and the Spirit's prompting. In modern discernment theory, they are understood as the early signals of moral awareness that guide the person toward authentic judgment. A classic articulation of this dynamic appears in Lonergan's account of interiority and self-transcendence in *Insight*, 589.

of "self-transcendence," in which the knower moves beyond bias and self-interest by integrating these three dimensions into a coherent act of judgment. In this manner modern discernment theory mirrors the classical Christian conviction that wisdom requires both intellectual rigor and spiritual attentiveness, grounding decision-making in a holistic engagement with truth.

Cassian refers to discernment as the "mother of virtues," emphasizing that without the capacity to judge wisely, no other virtue can be reliably cultivated or sustained. In *Conferences II*, he argues that even good intentions can become distorted when they are not guided by a clear, discerning heart. Discernment functions as the governing virtue that orders all others, enabling a person to distinguish authentic spiritual movements from those rooted in pride, fear, or self-deception. For Cassian, this means that humility, obedience, charity, and ascetic discipline all depend on discernment to prevent excess, imbalance, or misuse. It is the virtue that keeps zeal from becoming harshness, fasting from becoming vanity, and charity from becoming permissiveness. By naming discernment the "mother of virtues," Cassian underscores its generative role: it gives birth to mature moral and spiritual life by aligning the person's desires, practices, and judgments with the wisdom of God.[282] Thus, discernment becomes a posture of wise judgment.

Compassionate Engagement: Compassion

Contemporary ethics emphasizes empathy and solidarity which highlights the moral responsibility to enter into the suffering of others and to stand with them in their vulnerability. Nouwen argues that compassion requires more than detached concern and instead calls for a willingness to be affected, to "suffer with," and to recognize our shared humanity in the face of pain.[283] In this view, ethical maturity is measured not simply by adherence to principles but by the capacity to cultivate deep relational presence, i.e., an attentiveness that refuses to turn away from

[282] John Cassian, *Conferences*, II.

[283] Henri Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Image Books, 1983), 14. Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest, psychologist, and spiritual writer whose work has shaped contemporary Christian spirituality, pastoral care, and ethics. He was trained in both in theology and clinical psychology, and taught at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard before leaving academia to live and serve in the L'Arche Daybreak community in Toronto, where people with and without intellectual disabilities share life together. Nouwen's writing is marked by a rare blend of psychological insight, theological depth, and pastoral tenderness in which he explored themes such as vulnerability, compassion, loneliness, community, and the healing power of shared suffering. His book *Compassion* captures his conviction that authentic Christian life is rooted in empathy, solidarity, and a willingness to enter into the pain of others. He remains one of the most influential spiritual writers of the 20th century, known for making profound truths accessible without losing their depth.

another's wounds. It is solidarity that becomes the concrete expression of this empathy, binding individuals and communities together in mutual care and shared responsibility. Through this lens, compassion is not sentimentality but a transformative posture that reshapes how we see, respond to, and accompany one another in a fractured world.

Chrysostom stressed this by insisting that mercy is the highest expression of orthodox faith, grounding right belief in right practice. In his *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostle* (especially Homily 20) he rebukes any form of Christianity that prides itself on doctrinal precision while neglecting the *scarce* (poor), the *suffering*, or the *socially* marginal. For Chrysostom, mercy is not an optional ornament to orthodoxy but its clearest proof by showing that the life of the Church is authenticated when believers embody God's compassion in concrete acts of *sharing* (generosity), *shelter* (hospitality), and *support* (care). He argues that almsgiving, solidarity with the vulnerable, and the refusal to ignore human need are the true signs of a heart shaped by the gospel.[284] Thus, Chrysostom reframes orthodoxy much more than just correct confession but as a way of life in which divine mercy becomes visible through human action. Compassion thus becomes a posture of relational healing.

Ecumenical Openness: Curiosity

Ecumenism emphasizes mutual learning, shifting the goal of inter-church engagement from defending boundaries to cultivating relationships in which traditions are transformed through reciprocal exchange. Volf argues that genuine reconciliation requires a posture of openness in which each community acknowledges both its gifts and its limitations, allowing the other to speak into its wounds, blind spots, and unfulfilled possibilities.[285] Therefore, mutual learning actually becomes an act of "embrace" described as a movement of self-giving hospitality that neither dissolves identity nor clings to it defensively, but creates space for the other's truth to be received as a gift. In this framework, unity is not achieved by erasing difference but by allowing difference to become a site of shared growth. Therefore, ecumenism is viewed as a dynamic process of listening, receiving, and being reshaped through encounter with others. In other words, a communal journey in which traditions learn to inhabit one another's wisdom without losing their own integrity.

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[284] Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Philip Schaff, Homily 4.
[285] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67.

Patristic sources, such as that of Basil the Great offer early Christian examples of communities learning to live faithfully amid diversity, thus modeling unity across cultural and theological differences. In *The Longer Rules*, Basil emphasizes the shared life of believers as a school of charity in which differences of background, temperament, and perspective become opportunities for mutual refinement rather than division.[286] Basil insists that the Christian community is held together not by a strict or rigid uniformity but by a common commitment to Christ that is visibly expressed through humility, mutual submission, and the pursuit of the common good. For Basil, unity is forged through practices of *considering* (listening), *correction*, and *cooperation*, healthy relational habits that allow believers from varied contexts to discern together what faithfulness requires. Therefore, the patristic tradition offers a lived witness to the possibility of communion across difference, anticipating the ecumenical conviction that diversity (when rightly ordered by love) strengthens rather than threatens the Church's witness (and openness becomes a posture of shared pilgrimage).

Table 8. The Path to Transformation: From Rigidity to G.R.A.C.E.

Dimension of Maturity	Mature Catholic Spirituality (The Move to Harmony)	Mature Protestant Spirituality (The Move to Renewal)
Primary Shift	Moves from Authority → Absolutism → Aggression	Moves from Autonomy → Anarchy → Alienation
New Core Triad	Humility → Healing → Harmony: Replacing defensiveness with a receptive, peaceful posture.	Recognition → Reconciliation → Renewal: Embracing tradition and communal wisdom.
G - Grounded Identity	Rooted in Christ rather than purely institutional status; secure enough to admit historical faults.	Rooted in Christ rather than private interpretation; secure enough to value the "Great Tradition."
R - Receptive Posture	Humility: Replaces authoritarian defensiveness with a willingness to learn from the Holy Spirit in others.	Recognition: Replaces intellectual pride with an appreciation for the wisdom of the global and historical Church.
A - Attentive Discernment	Healing: Replaces legalistic rigidity with a pastoral focus on the spirit of the law and the needs of the soul.	Charity: Replaces interpretive suspicion with "interpretive charity," seeking to understand before critiquing.

[286] Basil the Great, *The Longer Rules*, 26.

C - Compassionate Engagement	Harmony: Replaces institutional pride with a desire for genuine unity that respects diversity.	Reconciliation: Replaces sectarian isolation with a desire to heal the wounds of the broken Body of Christ.
E - Ecumenical Openness	Moves from "Closure" to seeing the work of God outside the visible institutional boundaries.	Moves from "Alienation" to seeing the work of God within the historical and sacramental continuity.

The Result: Dissolving the Cycle

By adopting these mature markers, the Fear → Fixation → Ferocity cycle is broken:

- Fear is cast out by a Grounded Identity.
- Fixation is dissolved by a Receptive Posture and an Attentive Discernment.
- Ferocity is transformed into Compassionate Engagement and Ecumenical Openness.

In this stage of spiritual development, the believer no longer needs the "other" to serve as a foil or a threat in order to secure their own identity. The anxious impulse to define oneself over against another person or tradition gives way to a deeper, more grounded confidence *rooted* in God rather than in *rivalry*. As a result, difference is no longer interpreted as some kind of danger but rather as an invitation and an opening through which one's own convictions can be clarified, *cultivated* (refined), and *completed* (enriched). Traditions become partners in *mutual sharpening* rather than opponents in *mutual shattering*, offering perspectives that illuminate blind spots, expand imagination, and deepen faithfulness. This mature posture thus enables one to receive the gifts of another community without fear of losing their own and helps them to recognize that genuine growth often emerges through an engagement that is both humble and reciprocal.

Table 9. Barriers to Ecumenism and Healing Paths

Barrier	Psychological Root	Triad/Acronym	Healing Response
Identity Loss	Identity-fusion	Fear → Fixation → Ferocity	Grounded Identity (G.R.A.C.E.)
Distrust	Historical wounds	Wounding → Withdrawing → Weaponizing	Compassionate presence
Uncertainty	Anxiety/Insecurity	Control → Certainty → Closure	Discernment/Tension-holding
Projection	Unowned fear	Projection → Polarization → Paranoia	Self-examination & Humility
Superiority	Ego protection	Superiority → Separation → Stagnation	Curiosity & Charity

4. ARC and the Development of Spiritual Maturity

The ARC model not only explains the roots of confessional rigidity but also illuminates the developmental path toward spiritual maturity. When integrated with the G.R.A.C.E. framework, ARC reveals how healing unfolds across theological, anthropological, psychological, and sociological dimensions.

Attachment: Grounded Identity

Secure attachment is the foundation of spiritual maturity because it provides the stable relational ground from which a person can risk growth, self-examination, and genuine openness to God and others. Winnicott's account of early development shows that a reliable, attuned environment enables the child to internalize a sense of safety that later becomes the capacity to be alone without fear, to relate without defensiveness, and to explore without anxiety.[287] In spiritual terms, this secure base becomes the inner posture that allows one to trust God's presence, face their own vulnerabilities, and engage others without needing to control, idealize, or withdraw. Without such rootedness, religious life easily collapses into compliance, fear, or perfectionism. However, with it, the person can move toward authentic freedom, responsibility, and love. Secure attachment to God (theologically) frees believers from the need to defend their tradition as if defending their worth, and anthropologically, secure attachment to community allows for belonging without boundary-policing. Psychologically, secure attachment and grounded identity reduces fear and reactivity, thus enabling one's curiosity and openness while sociologically it fosters stable communities that are in turn capable of engaging difference without fragmentation.

[287] Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes*, 148.

Athanasius's theology of deification[288] reflects this dynamic in that when identity is grounded in Christ, the believer is liberated from the fear, insecurity, and rivalry that arise from trying to secure the self through *comparison* or *competition*. In *On the Incarnation*, he argues that the Word's assumption of human nature restores humanity to its proper orientation toward God, re-anchoring the self in a source of life that cannot be threatened or diminished by others.[289] Therefore, deification is not an escape from humanity but rather the healing of its fragmentation, producing a stability that frees the person from anxious self-assertion. Rooted in Christ's indestructible life, the believer can engage others without defensiveness, envy, or hostility, because their worth no longer depends on superiority but on participation in the divine life itself.

Regulation: Attentive Discernment

Regulation enables people to tolerate ambiguity, manage anxiety, and respond to conflict without resorting to polemical aggression because it stabilizes the internal world enough for thoughtful, rather than reactive, engagement. Beck's analysis shows that when individuals lack emotional regulation, they are far more likely to interpret *disagreement as disruption, difference as danger*, and *conflict as a contest* (zero-sum) that must be won.[290] Thus, dysregulation narrows perception, fuels catastrophic thinking, and primes the mind for hostility. Yet by contrast, regulated individuals can pause, assess, and choose responses that align with their values rather than their fears. Framed in a spiritual context this means believers can hold tension without collapsing into defensiveness, remain present in difficult conversations, and resist the impulse to demonize others. Hence, regulation becomes both a moral and spiritual capacity by creating the psychological space necessary for *contrition* (humility), *curiosity*, and *compassion* to take root, allowing conflict to become an *environment for growth* rather than an *excuse for goading*. Regulation, when applied

[288] Often called *theosis,* deification is the classical theological view that human beings are called to share in the very life of God. It does not mean becoming divine by nature, but being transformed by grace so that we participate in God's holiness, love, and immortality. In the early Church, especially among the Greek Fathers, deification names the goal of salvation in that through Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection, humanity is restored to communion with God and enabled to reflect God's character. Athanasius famously summarizes this by saying that the Word became human "so that we might become godlike," a shorthand for participation in God's life through union with Christ. Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil the Great, and later Maximus the Confessor develop this further, describing deification as the healing and elevation of human nature through the Spirit's work. In the Western tradition, thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas affirm the same reality albeit in different terms, speaking of sanctifying grace as the created participation in God's own life. Across these traditions, deification expresses the conviction that salvation is more than just forgiveness, it is also transformation, i.e., the restoration of humanity to its intended destiny of communion, likeness, and intimate fellowship with God.

[289] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr, 54.

[290] Beck, *Prisoners of Hate*, 44.

to a theological context, supports nuanced interpretation rather than literalism or absolutism.[291] Viewing it anthropologically, we can see how it allows ritual and tradition to function as *meaningful collections* (sources) rather than *mechanisms of control*. Psychologically, it interrupts the cycle of Fear → Fixation → Ferocity, while sociologically, it reduces polarization and fosters meaningful dialogue between individuals and groups.

Gregory of Nyssa's emphasis on spiritual progress (*epektasis*)[292] reflects a regulated posture that embraces mystery rather than demanding closure, portraying the Christian and spiritual life as an endless movement into God rather than a quest for finality or control. In *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, he describes the soul's ascent as an ever-deepening desire that is continually satisfied yet continually drawn further, a dynamic that requires the capacity to tolerate longing, incompleteness, and the unknown.[293] This vision presupposes an inner steadiness, basically, that only a regulated soul can welcome the infinite without collapsing into anxiety or grasping for premature certainty. Instead of forcing doctrinal or experiential closure, Gregory instead invites believers to rest in the paradox of a God who is both knowable and inexhaustible. Spiritual maturity, in this frame, is marked not by possessing all the answers in life, but by the freedom to journey, to wonder, and to be continually transformed by the mystery of divine life.

Competency: Ecumenical Generosity

Competency enables believers to engage others with empathy, humility, and interpretive charity because it equips them with the theological, emotional, and relational skills needed for

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[291] Regulation supports nuanced interpretation rather than literalism or absolutism, not because all doctrines are flexible, but because a regulated mind can discern which truths are absolute and which require contextual, pastoral, or metaphorical reading. Christian theology and history has always held that certain claims are non-negotiable, i.e., absolute (e.g., the resurrection of Christ, the goodness of creation, the call to love God and neighbor, etc.). These are literal, foundational affirmations of the faith, yet the same tradition recognizes that Scripture also contains poetry, parables, hyperbole, and culturally conditioned instruction that require interpretive wisdom. Regulation enables believers to approach this diversity without fear in that they can affirm absolute truths with confidence while also engaging complex or ambiguous passages with patience, curiosity, and humility. In sum, regulation does not relativize doctrine it simply prevents the anxious rigidity that collapses all texts into the same interpretive mode. It allows believers to distinguish between what must be held firmly and what must be read discerningly, preserving both conviction and charity.

[292] The Greek word ἐπέκτασις (epektasis) comes from the verb ἐπεκτείνομαι, meaning "to stretch out," "to extend forward," or "to press onward." This is Gregory's term for the soul's unceasing ascent into God, a journey that never reaches a final plateau because God is infinite and therefore endlessly knowable. Rather than imagining spiritual life as arriving at a fixed state of completion, Gregory describes it as a perpetual stretching forward, an eternal movement of desire, discovery, and transformation.

[293] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Translated by Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 77.

genuine understanding rather than defensive reaction. Williams argues the point that mature Christian reasoning requires a disciplined attentiveness to the complexity of doctrine, history, and human experience, a position and posture that resists the temptation to simplify others' positions into caricatures.[294] When believers are competent by being formed in the practices of careful listening, contextual reading, and self-critical reflection, they can then approach disagreement without anxiety or hostility. Competency in turn becomes a moral virtue as it steadies the self, opens space for compassion, and enables a generous reading of another's intentions. From this perspective, theological engagement becomes an act of *compassion* rather than *combat*, grounded in the confidence that truth is best served through a patient and charitable encounter. Therefore, within the T.A.P.S. framework, competency theologically supports mature engagement with tradition and Scripture while anthropologically it advances adaptability and cultural intelligence. Psychologically, competency and ecumenical generosity cultivates relational skills that are so necessary for dialogue and sociologically it strengthens the capacity for cooperation and shared discernment among individuals and groups.

Thus, competency is the *developmental foundation* of the G.R.A.C.E. posture, especially with regard to receptive openness, attentive discernment, and ecumenical generosity since it provides the skills and stability necessary for genuine learning across difference. Murray emphasizes that receptive ecumenism requires more than just a sense of goodwill. It demands a well-formed capacity to understand one's own tradition, to recognize its limits, and then to engage others with intellectual and spiritual maturity.[295] Competent believers are not threatened by unfamiliar perspectives, nor are they easily swayed by superficial agreement. Instead, they possess the theological literacy, emotional regulation, and reflective depth needed to listen carefully, evaluate wisely, and receive generously.

In summary, competency becomes the soil in which the G.R.A.C.E. posture can take root, because without a well-formed foundation the virtues it names cannot germinate, much less flourish. Rich soil does more than hold a seed, it also provides the nutrients, stability, and conditions necessary for sustained growth. From this metaphoric picture we can see how competency nourishes receptive openness by giving believers the theological literacy and emotional steadiness needed to welcome insights from others without fear. It further anchors

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[294] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 45.
[295] Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, 3.

attentive discernment by supplying the depth and texture that allow wise judgment to develop rather than wither under pressure. And, finally, it sustains ecumenical generosity by creating an environment where curiosity, humility, and mutual learning can grow strong and resilient. When the soil is deep and healthy, the G.R.A.C.E. posture does not remain a fragile ideal but becomes a living, rooted way of engaging the world.

Part IV - Theological-Psychological Synthesis

1. Integrating Theology and Psychology

Why Doctrinal Conflict Alone Cannot Explain Confessional Hostility

As we have noted, the enduring conflict between Roman Catholics and orthodox Protestants cannot be explained by doctrinal differences alone. While disagreements over authority, sacramentality, ecclesiology, and interpretive method remain substantive, the emotional intensity and rigidity that often accompany confessional hostility points to forces operating beneath the level of formal theological argument. If doctrine were the primary driver of antagonism, one would expect the sharpest conflicts to arise among those with the deepest theological literacy; however, the opposite is frequently observed. The most inflexible and polemical expressions of confessional identity often emerge in contexts where doctrinal understanding is minimal, which suggests that confessional conflict is animated less by the content of belief than by the psychological and social functions those beliefs serve.

The predictable patterns of Fear → Fixation → Ferocity, Control → Certainty → Closure, and Projection → Polarization → Paranoia, along with the dynamics summarized in the R.I.G.I.D. and S.A.F.E. schemas, show that confessional antagonism is deeply tied to identity vulnerability. Fear (whether of doctrinal error, ecclesial loss, cultural displacement, or personal instability) creates the conditions in which theological differences become symbolic stand-ins for existential threats. Fixation then emerges as individuals or communities cling to boundary markers as a means of preserving coherence. Thus, ferocity follows as a defensive posture in which the opposing tradition becomes the imagined source of danger rather than a partner in theological inquiry.

Historical memory further intensifies these reactions due in part to centuries of conflict, persecution, polemic, and mutual suspicion which have left both traditions with inherited narratives that predispose them to interpret one another through the lens of threat. These narratives often operate implicitly, shaping emotional responses long before conscious reasoning begins. As Jonathan Haidt's work on moral psychology demonstrates, people typically form intuitive judgments first and then supply theological or moral rationalizations afterward. Haidt's research is enormously helpful here because it clarifies why confessional disputes so often escalate beyond the level of doctrine. His central claim is that human beings do not begin with careful reasoning and then arrive at a moral or theological conclusion. Instead, we begin with an intuitive, emotionally charged reaction, and only afterward do we construct a rational justification that makes our reaction appear principled, theological, or morally grounded. [296] This in turn helps explain why confessional disputes so often escalate beyond the level of doctrinal disagreement into matters of loyalty, purity, and group survival.

Hence, doctrinal conflict alone cannot account for the persistence or intensity of Catholic-Protestant hostility. The deeper drivers lie in the interplay of identity preservation, historical trauma, and group-threat perception: forces that transform theological differences into emotionally charged markers of belonging and exclusion. Only by recognizing these underlying dynamics can the path toward genuine understanding and reconciliation begin.

How Psychological Needs Shape Theological Expression

Identity fusion, the psychological merging of self with tradition, sits at the core of confessional rigidity. When fusion occurs, a person's sense of "who I am" becomes inseparable from "what my tradition teaches," so that any challenge to the tradition is felt as a challenge to the

[296] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 89. Rather than beginning with careful doctrinal analysis, individuals often experience an immediate, emotionally charged reaction to another tradition's practices or beliefs, a reaction shaped by upbringing, communal narratives, and symbolic worlds. The reasoning that follows functions less as an open inquiry and more as a justification for the intuition already felt. For example, a Protestant who has been implicitly taught that Catholic liturgy is "ritualistic" or "works-based" may feel an instinctive discomfort upon entering a Mass long before they can articulate a theological critique of sacramentality. The incense, vestments, and ritual gestures trigger a gut-level sense of spiritual unease, and only afterward does the person generate doctrinal explanations such as "Catholics add human traditions to Scripture" or "this resembles Old Testament priestcraft." The same dynamic occurs in reverse when a Catholic encounters a non-liturgical Protestant service and intuitively associates its simplicity with fragmentation or doctrinal instability, later rationalizing this reaction with appeals to apostolic continuity or sacramental theology. Yet in both cases, the theological argument is real but secondary in that the intuitive response came first. Haidt's insight helps explain why confessional disputes so often escalate beyond the level of doctrinal disagreement because what is being defended is not so much a proposition as it is an intuitive moral world that feels threatened by the presence of the other.

self. As Henri Tajfel's work on social identity shows, group belonging can become a primary source of personal meaning and security, making perceived threats to the group trigger strong defensive reactions.[297] This is why a Catholic may react intensely when the Eucharist is questioned, or a Protestant may feel personally attacked when *sola scriptura* is critiqued for the issue is no longer doctrinal but existential. In such cases, individuals are not so much defending propositions as they are defending their identity, which in turn makes flexibility difficult and hostility more likely.

When theology becomes identity, disagreement becomes threat. This fusion activates the R.I.G.I.D. pattern: reactivity, identity fusion, group-threat perception, insecurity, and defensiveness. Catholics fear fragmentation while Protestants fear coercion. Hence, each tradition embodies the other's shadow, producing the triad of Superiority → Separation → Stagnation, a cycle in which each community projects its internal anxieties onto the other.[298] Augustine warned that pride blinds the soul to its own wounds, making projection a spiritual as well as psychological danger.[299] Thus, when pride prevents honest self-examination, the faults a person cannot bear to acknowledge internally are displaced onto others. In confessional contexts, this means that Catholics and Protestants often attribute to the other tradition the very weaknesses they refuse to confront within their own. Augustine's insight reveals that much argumentative and defensive energy arises not from theological clarity but from unhealed interior wounds that pride keeps hidden, turning the religious other into a mirror for one's own unrecognized fears.

How Trauma Distorts Doctrine Into Ideology

As we have previously discussed, trauma intensifies these dynamics. Catholic collective trauma (e.g., loss of cultural dominance, Reformation fragmentation, anticlerical revolutions, and abuse scandals) produces the triad Wounding → Withdrawing → Weaponizing, expressed through

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[297] Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, 255.

[298] Jung, *Aion*, 92.

[299] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, X. Augustine's *Confessions* employs mirror imagery to describe the soul's struggle for honest self-knowledge, emphasizing how pride distorts one's inner vision. He observes that the soul attempts to "look at itself," yet what it sees is clouded, fragmented, or obscured because it is turned away from God. Pride functions like a fogged or warped mirror. It prevents the person from perceiving their true condition and instead reflects back a flattering or distorted image shaped by self-love. As a result, the individual becomes blind to their own wounds and sins, mistaking illusion for truth. This distortion makes projection almost inevitable, for what the soul cannot bear to acknowledge within itself it unconsciously attributes to others. Augustine's insight reveals that the failure of self-perception is more than just a psychological limitation but it is a spiritual disorder, and only humility and divine illumination can clear the mirror of the heart so that the self may be seen truthfully.

authoritarian defensiveness and institutional retrenchment.[300] On the other hand, Protestant trauma (persecution, fear of corruption, denominational instability, and anxiety about authenticity) produces the same triad in a different key: wounded conscience, withdrawal into doctrinal purity, and weaponizing Scripture. Alister McGrath notes that Protestant identity has long been shaped by experiences of vulnerability (e.g., persecution, fear of doctrinal corruption, chronic denominational instability, etc.) and that these pressures create what he calls a "conscience-driven" spirituality, where believers feel personally responsible for guarding the purity of the gospel. When that conscience is wounded, Protestants often retreat into stricter doctrinal precision as a way of regaining stability. McGrath also observes that Protestantism's emphasis on Scripture can, under threat, shift from devotion to defensiveness, turning biblical texts into tools for boundary-policing rather than spiritual formation. Through this dynamic his analysis aligns closely with the pattern we describe in this research: wounded conscience → withdrawal into doctrinal purity → weaponizing Scripture.[301] Therefore, trauma makes trust difficult while ecumenism requires trust. As Judith Herman notes, trauma reorganizes the personality around fear, vigilance, and control,[302] and these dynamics are not just psychological but theological as trauma distorts the imagination, narrows interpretive horizons, and transforms doctrine into ideology.

How Spiritual Maturity Heals Psychological Wounds

Donald Capps's account of the "depleted self" helps explain why many believers instinctively resist the healing work that ecumenism requires. Capps argues that trauma, chronic insecurity, and environments of high demand produce a self that is emotionally exhausted, overly dependent on external structures, and fearful of situations that require openness or flexibility. A depleted self seeks protection through rigidity, certainty, and predictable authority, because these provide the illusion of stability in the face of internal fragility.[303] This dynamic maps directly onto confessional behavior: ecumenism asks for vulnerability, humility, and the willingness to inhabit ambiguity which is precisely the conditions that feel threatening to a self shaped by depletion. In Capps's terms, such a person lacks the internal resources to tolerate uncertainty and therefore clings to rigid forms of identity maintenance.

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[300] Sipe, *A Secret World*, 77.
[301] McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 89.
[302] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 86.
[303] Capps, *The Depleted Self*, 102.

This is why the S.A.F.E. pattern (Stability, Answers, Familiarity, Expectation control) becomes a psychological refuge. Each element corresponds to what Capps identifies as compensatory strategies of the depleted self: stability counteracts inner instability; answers soothe anxiety; familiarity reduces the fear of the unknown; and expectation control protects against the unpredictability of relational or theological encounter. Thus, resistance to ecumenism is not simply doctrinal but deeply psychological, and for those whose selves have been depleted by trauma, conflict, or chronic insecurity, the very practices that foster healing (openness, curiosity, and mutual recognition) initially feel unsafe, because they require the relinquishing of the rigid defenses that have long functioned as emotional survival mechanisms.

Rigid systems offer the illusion of safety and dialogue tends to threaten that safety. Thus, people cling to rigid boundaries not because they are malicious but because they are afraid. Gregory the Great observed that wounded souls often cling to severity because gentleness feels dangerous. In his *Pastoral Rule*, he notes that those who have been harmed, shamed, or destabilized by life's wounds frequently adopt harshness as a protective shield. Severity offers the illusion of strength in that it creates clear boundaries, demands obedience, and keeps vulnerability at a distance. On the other hand, gentleness requires openness, trust, and the willingness to be affected by another, which is precisely the capacities that feel unsafe to a wounded or anxious heart. Thus, Gregory explains that some believers gravitate toward strictness not out of holiness but out of fear, and that they mistake *rigidity* for *righteousness* because it allows them to avoid the tenderness that might expose their pain. Hence, severity becomes a defensive spirituality, a way of managing inner fragility by projecting strength outward, while gentleness (though spiritually healthier) feels threatening because it invites the very vulnerability the wounded soul has learned to avoid.[304]

However, it is spiritual maturity that transforms these dynamics. Maturity moves Catholics from Authority → Absolutism → Aggression to Humility → Healing → Harmony, and Protestants from Autonomy → Anarchy → Alienation to Recognition → Reconciliation → Renewal. Mature believers embody the G.R.A.C.E. posture: grounded identity, receptive openness, attentive discernment, compassionate engagement, and ecumenical generosity.[305] Each one no longer needs to defend their tradition as if defending their worth if their identity is truly rooted in God and not

[304] Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Rule*, trans. George Demacopoulos, I.2.
[305] Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 67.

simply in tribal belonging. Athanasius taught that union with Christ grounds identity in divine life rather than human achievement. For him, the heart of salvation is not moral improvement or intellectual mastery but participation, more specifically the believer is drawn into the very life of God through the incarnate Son. In *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius argues that Christ became human so that humans might "become partakers of the divine nature," meaning that true identity is *received*, not *reconstructed*. This union reorients the self away from the fragile project of self-definition and toward a stability rooted in God's own being. Because identity flows from Christ's life rather than personal performance, the believer is freed from the anxiety of always having to prove their worth (either to themselves, others, or God), defend their status, or secure righteousness through effort. In Athanasius's vision, divine life becomes the anchor of the self, rendering human achievement secondary and relativized. This has profound implications for confessional conflict for when identity is grounded in Christ rather than in one's tradition, purity, or correctness, the need for rigidity diminishes. Therefore, the self no longer clings to doctrinal or institutional markers as sources of worth because its deepest security rests in participation in the life of God.[306]

In this synthesis, we see how theology and psychology converge in the following way: confessional rigidity is not primarily a theological failure but a psychological one, and spiritual maturity is not just moral improvement but the healing of fear, trauma, and identity fusion.[307] The ecumenical path becomes possible only when believers move from *fear to freedom*, from *defensiveness to discernment*, from *tribal identity to theological impartiality* (i.e., charity). This is the movement from Control → Certainty → Closure to Humility → Healing → Harmony. It is the work of grace, for grace is the hidden agent that enables this entire transformation. Left to themselves, wounded or anxious believers naturally cling to control, certainty, and closure because these feel safe. Hence, no amount of argument, moral exhortation, or doctrinal precision can dismantle the defenses that have been built by trauma or identity fusion. Only grace can soften fear, loosen rigidity, and open the heart to vulnerability. Thus the movement from fear to freedom,

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[306] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr, 54. For Athanasius, a person's deepest identity is secured by sharing in Christ's life, not by anything they accomplish on their own. When divine life becomes the foundation of who someone is, all forms of human striving (e.g., moral effort, intellectual mastery, religious performance, or confessional correctness) lose their power to define the self. They are not unimportant, but they are secondary, placed in proper proportion because they no longer carry the weight of establishing worth or identity. In other words, union with Christ reorders the hierarchy of identity. What once felt essential (achievement, purity, correctness, status) now becomes relative to the far greater truth that the self is grounded in divine life.

[307] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 241.

from defensiveness to discernment, and from tribal identity to theological impartiality is more than just psychological growth, it is divine healing. Grace reorders the inner world so that humility becomes possible, healing becomes welcomed, and harmony becomes imaginable.[308] In short, the ecumenical path is not a human achievement but a gift: an unearned capacity to see the other with charity, to release the need for control, and to rest in a truth larger than one's own tradition.[309]

Table 10. Theological Fortressing vs. Theological Freedom

Category	Fortressed Posture (Immature)	Mature Posture (Free)
Scripture	Literalism, proof-texting, weaponization	Interpretive charity, historical context
Tradition	Defensive absolutism, stagnation	Historical humility, living wisdom
Identity	Tribalism, "Us vs. Them"[310]	Christ-centered security
Ecumenism	Suspicion, caricature	Curiosity, encounter, receptivity
Psychological Driver	Fear	Freedom

[308] Grace, in Christian theology, is God's freely given and transformative self-gift that heals, restores, and elevates humanity beyond what it could ever achieve on its own. More than just divine kindness or moral leniency, it is God's own life poured into human life, freeing the person from the exhausting project of self-justification and grounding identity in divine love rather than human performance. Grace heals the wounds of fear, trauma, and disordered desire; it reorders the heart so that humility, charity, and communion become possible; and it empowers the virtues that human effort alone cannot sustain. Most profoundly, grace draws humanity into participation in God's life, enabling a depth of freedom, wholeness, and relational openness that nature by itself cannot produce.

[309] In this context, "a truth larger than one's own tradition" refers to the recognition that God's reality exceeds the limits of any single confessional system. It is the acknowledgment that no church, doctrine, or historical community (however faithful) can contain the fullness of divine mystery. To rest in this larger truth is to trust that God's grace is more spacious than our boundaries, that Christ's body is wider than our particular loyalties, and that the Holy Spirit is at work beyond the contours of our inherited frameworks. Such resting does not diminish the value of one's tradition, but rather it frees the believer from treating it as ultimate. It cultivates humility, openness, and a willingness to receive gifts from other parts of the Christian family. Thus, resting in a truth larger than one's own tradition becomes an act of faith in the God who transcends our systems and unites us in a reality deeper than our differences.

[310] When I use the term "tribalism" in this paper, I am employing it functionally as a negative psychological and sociological distortion of religious identity as opposed to its more neutral description of group belonging. In the context of this research, it names the moment when confessional identity shifts from a healthy sense of community to a fear-driven posture of boundary fortressing. In this mode, group loyalty becomes fused with survival making *difference* and *dialogue* feel *dangerous* (and threatening). In this context, tribalism narrows perception, amplifies projection, and transforms theological commitments into defensive markers of purity rather than pathways to truth. It thrives on unresolved trauma, low existential security, and the need for stability, producing rigid "us versus them" dynamics that mirror the very anxieties each tradition fears in the other. In sum, tribalism is portrayed as a constricted, reactive posture that undermines spiritual maturity, distorts doctrine into ideology, and prevents Catholics and Protestants from engaging one another with *contrition, curiosity*, or *charity*.

2. ARC as a Bridge Between Trauma and Theology

The ARC model provides a conceptual bridge between trauma psychology and theological anthropology, revealing why confessional rigidity cannot be understood as a purely doctrinal phenomenon.[311] ARC clarifies how trauma distorts the theological imagination, reshapes ritual belonging, narrows interpretive horizons, and reorganizes communal life.

Attachment and Theological Identity

Attachment explains why believers fuse identity with tradition and why disagreement feels existentially threatening.[312] In the language of social identity theory, attachment functions as the psychological mechanism through which individuals internalize group membership as part of the self, creating what Henri Tajfel describes as a "cognitive-emotional merger" between personal identity and collective belonging. When this merger occurs, the tradition is no longer just a set of doctrines or practices but becomes an extension of the self's coherence, continuity, and worth. As a result, challenges to the tradition (whether they be doctrinal, liturgical, or historical) are now experienced not simply as intellectual disagreements but as real threats to the individual's own stability and value. This helps to explain why confessional disputes often carry an intensity disproportionate to their theological content in that we see the disagreement activating attachment-based fears of exclusion, fragmentation, or loss of identity. Within this context believers defend the tradition with the same urgency that the psyche uses to defend the self because the two have become functionally inseparable (i.e., identity fusion[313]).[314] Insecure attachment

[311] Blaustein and Kinniburgh, *Treating Traumatic Stress*, 45.
[312] Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, 255.
[313] Identity fusion is a psychological merger in which personal and collective identity are no longer distinguishable, leading to heightened reactivity and threat perception.
[314] Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, 255

theologically distorts the image of God, producing either authoritarian or permissive projections. When a person has not learned to trust that relationships can be stable and safe, this insecurity often gets carried into their spiritual life. where God is then imagined not as God truly is, but through the lens of past relational wounds. For some people this can result in an authoritarian projection where God feels harsh, demanding, or easily angered, and thus a relationship in which God is someone who must be appeased rather than loved. For others, it may produces a permissive projection in which God seems distant, indulgent, or unconcerned, and is characterized by a God who will not set boundaries or offer guidance. In both cases, the believer is not encountering the God of Christian revelation but a psychologically shaped substitute formed by unmet attachment needs.[315]

Patristic sources consistently warn that distorted images of God lead to distorted forms of community. Augustine notes that when the divine character is misperceived, the community inevitably mirrors that distortion: a harsh God produces harsh, defensive communities, while an indifferent God yields fragmented or permissive ones.[316] This aligns clinically with attachment research showing that insecure relational templates shape not only personal spirituality but also group dynamics. When God is imagined through the lens of anxiety, avoidance, or inconsistency, the community adopts the same relational posture, reproducing the believer's internal world at a collective level.

Regulation and Doctrinal Interpretation

Regulation explains why trauma produces absolutism, literalism, and polemical aggression as seen in van der Kolk's work where he details how dysregulation impairs executive functioning and narrows cognitive flexibility, predisposing individuals to rigid, defensive interpretive patterns.[317] When the nervous system is dysregulated (manifested in hyperarousal, emotional flooding, or chronic threat-sensitivity) the mind loses the capacity for nuance, symbolic thinking, and reflective judgment. From a theological perspective this dysregulation reduces doctrine to ideology because the individual can no longer tolerate ambiguity or interpretive tension, and so

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[315] See Kirk A. Bingaman, *Treating the New Anxiety: A Cognitive-Theological Approach* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 44-52; and Lee A. Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 79-103. Both authors demonstrate how insecure attachment patterns shape God-images, often producing authoritarian or permissive distortions that mirror early relational experiences.

[316] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, I.36.

[317] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score,* 62-76.

doctrine becomes a rigid structure used to stabilize an overwhelmed psyche rather than a living articulation of divine mystery.[318] Anthropologically speaking, dysregulation transforms ritual into a mechanism of control as seen by practices that are meant to mediate grace or cultivate communal belonging now become tools for managing anxiety, enforcing conformity, or warding off perceived threats.[319] Finally, from a sociological view dysregulation fuels polarization and factionalism as groups with heightened threat-sensitivity gravitate toward rigid boundaries, moral purity codes, and antagonistic postures toward out-groups.[320] In short, trauma-driven dysregulation reshapes doctrinal interpretation, ritual practice, and communal life, producing the very patterns of confessional rigidity that this study seeks to demonstrate.

Competency and Ecclesial Healing

Competency explains why spiritual maturity requires developmental growth, not just a doctrinal assent. Competency refers to the capacity to integrate belief, emotion, and behavior in ways that reflect psychological stability and theological depth. When this dimension is underdeveloped, believers may affirm correct doctrine yet still remain reactive, rigid, or relationally impaired. However, when cultivated, competency enables humility, curiosity, and compassion, virtues of which are essential for ecumenical healing and for engaging difference without fear.[321] Cassian's emphasis on discernment as the fruit of purified desire and disciplined

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[318] Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time Against the Speed of Modern Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 118-22. Root argues that when anxiety overwhelms a community, doctrine is easily weaponized as a stabilizing ideology rather than embraced as a dynamic theological grammar.

[319] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 34-39.

[320] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012), 103-110. Haidt's research shows how moral and social polarization intensifies when groups operate from threat-based emotional regulation patterns.

[321] Robert Kegan, The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 85-92. Kegan's developmental theory highlights the necessity of integrated cognitive emotional growth for mature meaning making. Additional commentary from this paper's researcher: competency highlights the necessity of integrated cognitive-emotional growth for mature meaning-making, which means that genuine spiritual maturity requires *the mind and the emotions to develop together rather than in isolation*. A person may possess extensive doctrinal knowledge, yet without emotional regulation, relational stability, and the capacity to tolerate ambiguity, that knowledge remains brittle, easily weaponized, or distorted by fear. In the same manner emotional sensitivity without cognitive depth produces instability, sentimentality, or susceptibility to ideological capture. It is therefore competency that names the developmental integration in which thinking becomes grounded, feeling becomes regulated, and interpretation becomes both wise and charitable. In this integrated state, believers can approach theological difference without anxiety, hold tension without collapsing into rigidity, and practice humility, curiosity, and compassion as stable dispositions rather than just aspirational or intellectual ideals. This is why the ARC model insists that spiritual maturity is more than just assent to doctrine but rather the formation of a self that is capable of living doctrine well, and where cognition and emotion work in a concerted way to produce discernment, charity, and ecumenical openness.

attention,[322] together with Thomas Aquinas's teaching that charity is the "form of all virtue" because it orders the entire moral life toward God and neighbor,[323] come together in a harmonious and complimentary way with ARC's developmental insight that true spiritual maturity emerges only when cognitive, emotional, and relational capacities grow in tandem. In sum, it is competency that marks the point at which theology becomes lived wisdom rather than just an intellectual assent and where the believer becomes capable of sustaining a healthy relational unity, dialogue, and charity across confessional boundaries.

[322] John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid, II.2-4. Cassian identifies discernment (*discretio*) as the central virtue that orders the monastic life and guards against spiritual and emotional imbalance.

[323] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 23, a. 8. Aquinas teaches that charity "gives form" to all virtues by directing them toward their proper end in love of God and neighbor.

3. ARC and the Movement from Rigidity to Grace

ARC reveals that the movement from Control → Certainty → Closure to Humility → Healing → Harmony is not only theological but psychological.[324] Harmony reflects the theologically ordered coherence of God's purposes (i.e., Scripture, tradition, and community held together in a unified narrative of divine faithfulness). Psychologically, harmony names the internal integration that allows a person to hold tension without fragmentation, to engage difference without fear, and to pursue unity without collapsing into uniformity. When believers experience this inner coherence, they are less reactive, more discerning, and more capable of sustaining charitable relationships across confessional lines. Thus, harmony is much more than just an ecclesial ideal; it is a developmental achievement and a sign that cognition, emotion, and relational capacity have matured enough to support genuine communion. In this view N.T. Wright's theological vision unites with contemporary psychological insight by showing that true harmony arises when the inner life is ordered, regulated, and attuned, enabling the outer life of the Church to reflect the peace it proclaims. In summary, healing requires secure attachment, emotional regulation, and relational competency and these are the capacities that are cultivated through spiritual practices, communal belonging, and the slow work of grace.

[324] Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 14.

4. Pastoral-Practical Conclusion

Healing: Transformation Framed As Restoration Rather Than Rupture

Here is where Miroslav Volf's argument in *Exclusion and Embrace* underscores a critical limitation in many attempts to repair the historic rupture between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Reconciliation cannot be secured through argumentative superiority or increasingly refined doctrinal formulations, and although doctrinal clarity remains indispensable for traditions committed to theological truth, clarity *by itself is insufficient* to address wounds that are simultaneously historical, psychological, and spiritual. When pursued without a corresponding growth in *self-scrutiny, self-regulated sentiment,* and *spiritual steadfastness,* doctrinal precision risks functioning as a *mechanism of exclusion* rather than a *manifestation of edification*. It can lead to the hardening of confessional boundaries, reinforce defensive postures, and perpetuate the very antagonisms it seeks to resolve.[325] Therefore, Volf's insight highlights the necessity of *personal* and *participatory* (i.e., communal) transformation as the precondition for genuine healing. Hence, it is only when theological conviction is integrated with practices of *humility, hospitality*, and *honesty* to the other can clarity contribute to *restore relationship* rather than *reinforce rupture*. In short, the deepest obstacles to ecumenism are not so much *epistemic* as they are *emotive*: fear of identity loss, unhealed trauma, the longing for certainty, and the instinct to protect the self by defending the system.

Holding: Creates A Stabilizing Environment Of Containment, Compassion, and Constancy

[325] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67.

It is for this reason that the ecumenical task is fundamentally *pastoral* before it is *polemical*. The deepest obstacles to reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants are rarely intellectual alone but more so *affective, associative* (relational), and *animating* (embodied). Therefore, those who resist healing must be approached in a spirit of *compassion*, and not with *consternation* sine their rigidity often functions as a refuge, i.e., a structured world that protects them from the anxiety of ambiguity. Their defensiveness operates like a shield and as a way of preserving a threatened sense of identity, and while their suspicion may present as obstinacy, it is a result of the lingering scar (if not open wound) of historical injury. As Erving Goffman's analysis of interaction rituals suggests, individuals manage their "face" through protective strategies that emerge precisely when they feel exposed or vulnerable.[326] These dynamics are not signs of *malice* but more so *markers of marring*. It is here that ecumenical engagement would be best to not treat such persons as *critics to be corrected* or *competitors to be conquered*, for they are wounded siblings whose fears must be recognized, whose dignity must be honored, and whose histories must be understood if genuine reconciliation is to take root.

As Cassian taught, discernment requires seeing the wound beneath the behavior and for him spiritual judgment was never a matter of evaluating actions in isolation but of attending to the interior afflictions that give rise to them. What often appears as obstinacy, anger, or resistance is often the surface expression of a deeper vulnerability, i.e., an unhealed injury, a fear of exposure, or a history of shame. Cassian's monastic psychology insists that genuine discernment looks past the presenting symptom to the subterranean sorrow that shapes it (Cassian uses the term *acedia*).[327] Therefore, to judge only the behavior is to in fact misread the person yet to perceive the wound is to more accurately understand the truth of their struggle. Such insight transforms correction from a punitive act into a compassionate one, because it recognizes that the soul's distortions are not just moral failures but a true manifestation of pain.

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[326] Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 23.

[327] John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid, II. Cassian's language about *acedia* ("weariness," "distress of heart," and "dejection") shows the deeper dynamics at play in contemporary confessional rigidity. His account makes clear that what appears as resistance on the surface is often the manifestation of an interior exhaustion that leaves the person with diminished capacity for trust, curiosity, or change. For Cassian, *acedia* is not simply a failure of discipline but a form of affective depletion that constricts one's relational openness and burdens the embodied self with heaviness. This framework helps clarify why some Christians respond to ecumenical encounter with suspicion or defensiveness for their theological positions are shaped less by doctrinal conviction than by the emotional fatigue and spiritual discouragement that Cassian describes. Reading their rigidity through this lens reframes it not as obstinacy but as a symptom of *acedia* "weariness", an ache of the heart that calls for *pastoral patience* rather than *polemical pressure*.

Hearing: Aligns With Attuned Response and Affective Availability

The mature Christian responds with what might be called the G.R.A.C.E. posture (grounded identity, receptive openness, attentive discernment, compassionate engagement, and ecumenical generosity) since this stance is not meant as a strategy for winning arguments but as a way of inhabiting one's faith with steadiness and spaciousness. It neither demands agreement nor collapses into relativism but instead it holds *conviction without contention* and *diversity without dread*. This attitude and approach refuses to allow anxiety, suspicion, or inherited polemics to dictate the terms of encounter and instead it seeks to create the conditions in which genuine listening becomes possible (as it is rooted in the confidence that truth is not threatened by charity). Therefore, healing begins when even one person chooses *humbleness over hubris, curiosity over caricature*, and *presence over polemic*. As theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams suggests, the work of theology (and by extension, the work of ecumenism) unfolds most faithfully when Christians meet one another not as *combative custodians of contested claims* but as *conversant companions cultivating comprehension*.[328] It begins when we see the other as a fellow pilgrim together on an earthly (and spiritual) journey (and not as a threat). And it begins when we recognize that the unity Christ prayed for is not achieved through *coercion* or *capitulation* but through love that *casts* out *consternation* (fear).[329]

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[328] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 45. Williams's own ecumenical ministry exemplifies this G.R.A.C.E. posture, modeling a way of holding deep conviction without hostility and genuine difference without fear. Throughout his theological and ecclesial leadership, Williams has insisted that Christian unity is not achieved through erasure of distinctives but through the patient, reverent attention that allows traditions to recognize one another truthfully. His work with Eastern Orthodoxy, his sustained dialogue with Roman Catholicism, and his efforts to hold the Anglican Communion together amid profound internal tensions all reflect a commitment to encounter grounded in humility rather than superiority, listening rather than defensiveness, and generosity rather than rivalry. For Williams, reconciliation is never a matter of strategic negotiation but of learning to inhabit the kind of presence in which the other is neither threat nor competitor but a gift. This vision aligns with the heart of the present argument: ecumenical healing begins when Christians refuse the reflex of suspicion and instead cultivate the spacious, non-anxious posture through which genuine communion becomes possible.

[329] Cf. 1 John 4:18. The movement toward healing begins when we learn to see the other not as a threat but as a fellow pilgrim and someone whose difference is not a danger to be managed but a gift to be received. Such recognition echoes the Johannine conviction that fear distorts our vision, while love restores it. The unity Christ prayed for is never secured through coercion or capitulation for it emerges only where love has displaced the anxious defensiveness that keeps communities apart. From this perspective, ecumenical encounter becomes a practical enactment of the apostle's claim that "perfect love casts out fear". It is the slow, patient work of allowing love (not suspicion or rivalry) to set the terms and tone of relationship. When Christians choose this path they create the conditions in which genuine communion can take root, not necessarily by erasing difference but by refusing to let fear govern how difference is perceived and received. Thus, the force of 1 John 4:18 becomes clearer when read within the fractured Johannine community, a setting marked by suspicion, doctrinal anxiety, and relational rupture. The author responds not with sharper boundary-drawing but with a grammatical argument that reorders the community's imagination: *phobos* (fear as relational mistrust) "is not in" *agapē*, the covenantal, self-giving love that defines God's

Harmony: Reconciliation as Relational Reintegration Rather Than Renewed Resentment

Gregory of Nyssa reminds us that the soul's healing unfolds gradually, through movements that are often imperceptible yet profoundly transformative.[330] In the same way, the work of ecumenism is slow, patient, and in some ways hidden from view for the simple reason that it does not advance primarily through grand declarations or institutional agreements but through the quiet, persistent practices that re-form the heart. Every act of interpretive charity, every refusal to demonize the other, and every moment of genuine listening becomes a small sacrament of reconciliation, i.e., a tangible sign of the Spirit's work to draw divided Christians toward one another. These seemingly modest gestures participate in the same divine economy Gregory describes: the steady, grace-filled restoration of what has been fractured.[331] In summary, ecumenical progress is not measured by *immediate results*, it is more realistically measured by the *incremental rise* of these sacramental encounters, each one a micro-conversion away from fear and toward a more true and meaningful communion.[332]

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life. Mature love (*teleia agapē*) does not just soothe fear; it actively "casts it out" (*exō ballei*), expelling the posture of self-protection that anticipates rejection or punishment (*kolasis*). ἡ τελεία ἀγάπη "the perfect (completed, mature) love". This is not "flawless" love but love that has reached its intended end or brought to its full expression. The present participle "the one who fears" signals an ongoing state of insecurity rather than a momentary emotion, a condition in which love has not yet completed its formative work. Historically and grammatically, then, the verse is not about psychological bravery but about the communal transformation that occurs when divine love reshapes how believers perceive one another. This is precisely the movement that this paper's argument names, i.e., healing begins when fear no longer governs encounter and when the other is no longer imagined as a threat but received as a fellow pilgrim in the life God makes possible.

[330] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 77.

[331] Ibid.

[332] In the painstaking work of reinterpreting inherited narratives, and in the subtle shifts of imagination that allow Christians to see one another not as rivals but as companions in Christ, these movements are rarely dramatic. In other words, they occur in conversations that leave no record, in prayers offered in solitude, and in the small conversions of attitude that accumulate over time. Ecumenism advances through these hidden graces; through the patient cultivation of trust, the quiet relinquishing of caricatures, and the steady, often unnoticed work of allowing love to displace fear. When I speak of "sacramental encounters," I am meaning all those small, grace-laden moments in which ordinary gestures become vessels of God's reconciling work. They are not sacraments in the formal, liturgical sense, but they share the same structure, i.e., a visible act that mediates an invisible grace. In ecumenical life, these encounters occur whenever Christians choose charity over suspicion, patience over haste, or truthful listening over defensive posturing. Such moments rarely attract attention, yet they quietly participate in the divine economy of healing. They become sacramental because they make present (however briefly) the unity God desires for the church, revealing that reconciliation is not only a distant goal but something already breaking into the present through the simplest acts of love.

Table 11. Immature vs. Mature Spiritual Postures

Dimension	Immature Catholic	Mature Catholic	Immature Protestant	Mature Protestant
Authority	Absolutism	Humble service	Suspicion	Communal accountability
Tradition	Institutional pride	Discernment	Rejection/ Ignorance	Appreciation of wisdom
Identity	Tribalism	Grounded identity	Hyper-individualism	Shared belonging
Maturity Triad	Authority→ Absolutism→Aggression	Humility→ Healing→ Harmony.	Autonomy→ Anarchy→ Alienation	Recognition→ Reconciliation→ Renewal

Conclusion

As we have seen, extreme expressions of Catholic and Protestant identity do not arise from theological disagreement alone, but rather from deeper psychological and sociological dynamics that are often rooted in fear, trauma, and a longing for certainty. The TAPS methodology as presented in this paper shows that confessional rigidity emerges when theological claims act as stand-in proxies (individuals and groups) for existential security, while anthropological patterns of belonging harden into boundary-maintenance, psychological wounds distort people's perception and sociological pressures reinforce group-threat narratives. The triads and acronyms that have been both presented and woven throughout this analysis (Fear → Fixation → Ferocity; Control → Certainty → Closure; Projection → Polarization → Paranoia; R.I.G.I.D.; S.A.F.E.; and G.R.A.C.E.) provide a framework to help clarify how these dynamics operate and how they can be transformed.

When considered in the light of theology, confessional rigidity reflects a disordered relationship to truth, in which doctrine becomes a defensive weapon rather than a path to communion.[333] Witnessed in the context of anthropology, it reveals how ritual, symbol, and communal memory can be co-opted by fear, turning sacred practices into mechanisms of exclusion.[334] Rigidity emerges psychologically from identity fusion, trauma responses, and the

[333] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67. In Volf's account, the problem with confessional rigidity is not simply that it mishandles doctrine but that it reflects a fundamentally disordered relationship to truth. Volf argues that truth (in its Christian sense) is never a possession to be defended or a weapon to be wielded, but a relational and reconciling reality that draws persons toward the other in love. Truth is fulfilled in embrace, not exclusion; it participates in God's movement toward reconciliation rather than in human attempts to secure identity through boundary-making. When communities treat truth as something they *own* (e.g., a badge of superiority or a shield against vulnerability) it becomes distorted into an instrument of self-protection and hostility. In this light, confessional rigidity represents not theological fidelity but a psychological misuse of doctrine, where fear and insecurity convert truth from a path to communion into a tool for fortressing the self.

[334] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 121. Douglas's analysis reveals how ritual, symbol, and communal memory can be instrumentalized by fear, such that sacred practices meant to sustain belonging become mechanisms of exclusion. When communities feel threatened, ritual precision hardens into boundary-policing, symbols become

need to protect the fragile self from perceived threat. From a sociological analysis it is reinforced by collective narratives such as persecution, chosenness, or decline that in turn shapes group identity even across generations. Patristic voices recognized these dangers well over a millennia ago as exemplified in Augustine who warned that pride blinds the soul to its own wounds, and Gregory of Nyssa who taught that communities stagnate when fear replaces charity.

Here it is the same TAPS framework that reveals that spiritual maturity offers a path beyond rigidity and that maturity is not just an exercise in moral improvement but rather the integration of the self, the healing of trauma, and the reordering of desire toward God. When believers embrace *contrition, curiosity,* and *compassion*, theology no longer becomes, or is used as a weapon of division but instead it gets back to its core purpose: a means of communion.[335] It has been shown that it is the virtue of *humility that dissolves haughtiness*; *curiosity disarms caricature*; and *compassion that disrupts* (the cycles of) *projection and polarization*. As Chrysostom, the early Church Father of the East and Archbishop of Constantinople taught: true orthodoxy is measured not by polemical victory but by the capacity to love the other as Christ loves the Church.[336]

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badges of purity rather than signs of grace, and communal memory is reshaped into a narrative of danger that justifies suspicion of the other.

[335] Theology is not merely an academic discipline concerned with abstract propositions; at its core, it is a relational practice ordered toward communion. Christian truth is never an isolated idea but a participation in the life of God, who is communion itself. When theology is reduced to intellectual mastery along it becomes a project of control (i.e., an attempt to possess truth rather than be transformed by it). However, when rightly understood, theology is an act of shared seeking and a way of entering more deeply into the mystery of God together, listening, discerning, and responding in love. Its purpose is not to win arguments but to cultivate the kind of mutual recognition and reconciliation that reflects the divine life. Thus, theology is *fundamentally* ecclesial and interpersonal for it exists to draw persons into communion with God and with each other, and shaping a community capable of truth, humility, and embrace. De Lubac argues that Christian truth is intrinsically communal, that theology arises from and returns to the Church's shared life, and that doctrine exists to build communion rather than to secure individual mastery. His famous line "There is no genuine theology that is not ecclesial" captures exactly the point that is being made in this research paper. See: Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 76-77.

[336] John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, Homily 4. In Christian theology, orthodoxy is not simply right belief but right worship and right relationship, i.e., a participation in the life of the Triune God whose very being is communion. The truth revealed in Christ is not an abstract proposition but the self-giving love of God made flesh, a love that reconciles enemies and gathers humanity into one Body; to "love the other as Christ loves the Church" is therefore not an ethical extra but the concrete expression of the very truth Christians confess. Chrysostom's insight reflects the patristic conviction that doctrine is validated by the shape of the life it produces, for if belief does not lead to Christlike love, it has failed to be truly orthodox and thus failed to reflect the God it claims to know. Philosophically, this is because the early Christian tradition understood truth not as mere correspondence but as participation, that is a way of being aligned with the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Truth is not possessed but embodied, and to know it is to be transformed by it. A posture of polemical victory by dominating the other or proving oneself superior reveals a refusal to participate in the very reality one claims to defend, whereas love is the mode of existence that corresponds to divine reality. In short, the capacity to love the other becomes the decisive criterion of genuine orthodoxy, for it discloses whether one's life actually participates in the truth one professes.

Ecumenism, then, is more than just doctrinal negotiation, it is in fact the healing of the human heart. In a theological context, ecumenism requires recognizing the work of the Spirit beyond one's own boundaries. Let us further consider that anthropologically it requires entering the symbolic world of the other with *reverence rather than revolt*, and *charity rather than cynicism* while psychologically, it demands the courage to confront one's wounds and relinquish the illusion of certainty,[337] because genuine transformation requires facing the fears, losses, and unmet needs that rigid beliefs often conceal. Furthermore, it involves tolerating ambiguity long enough for deeper healing to occur, thus allowing the self to move from defensive control toward a more grounded, flexible, and truthful way of relating to God, others, and one's own inner life. Considering this from a sociological viewpoint, it calls for communities to cultivate practices of hospitality, shared discernment, and mutual accountability by creating relational spaces where difference is *embraced* rather than *excluded*, structuring decision-making processes that prioritize *hearing* over *hostility* and establishing norms that encourage members to speak truthfully while remaining rooted in the well-being of the whole. These proposed practices move the community's center of gravity from *border-building* to *belonging-building*, forming a social communal landscape in which trust can grow, conflict can be navigated without fragmentation, and the community's identity is sustained by the shared work of seeking the good together.

The paper has shown how the G.R.A.C.E. framework (grounded identity, receptive openness, attentive discernment, compassionate engagement, and ecumenical generosity) embodies this transformation. It is grounded identity that frees believers from the need to defend their tradition as if defending their self-worth, and receptive openness that allows them to learn from the gifts of other traditions without fear of contamination. Attentive discernment replaces *suspicion* with *sagacity* while compassionate engagement transforms *conflict* into *communion*.

[337] The *illusion of certainty* refers to the psychological phenomenon in which individuals mistake emotional security for intellectual clarity, treating the feeling of being safe as if it were the same thing as knowing the truth. Under conditions of fear, threat, or unresolved trauma, the mind gravitates toward rigid beliefs, not because those beliefs are necessarily true, but because they provide a sense of stability, predictability, and control. This creates a powerful but deceptive internal experience: the more anxious the person feels, the more tightly they cling to absolutized claims, and the tighter the grip, the more "certain" those claims feel. The result is a closed system in which certainty is generated by defensiveness, not discernment; by identity protection, not theological insight. See: Steven Stosny, "The Problem with Certainty," *Psychology Today*, 2018; Giulia Suro, "Why Trauma Makes Us Rigid Thinkers," *Psychology Today*, 2021; Grace Higa, "Cognitive Rigidity as a Trauma Response," *Balanced Mind of NY*, 2022; Neeshu Rathore, "Trauma and Cognitive Rigidity," *Psywellpath*, 2023; *Issue Magazine*, "The Psychology of Certainty: How Fear Masquerades as Conviction," 2020.

Finally, ecumenical generosity reflects the expansive love of God who *gathers* rather than *scatters*.[338]

Ultimately, the path forward is not *triumphalist* but *trinitarian* (i.e., love that is inherently self-giving, relational). Healing requires vulnerability, patience, and the willingness to let love cast out fear. The Church becomes a sign of reconciliation (not through *coercion* or *capitulation*)[339] but through the slow, hidden work of grace in wounded hearts and divided communities. Therefore, every act of interpretive charity, every refusal to demonize, and every moment of genuine listening becomes a small sacrament of unity.

The chapter ends here, but the work continues: to move from fear to freedom, from rigidity to grace, from rivalry to communion. This is the ecumenical path. This is the path of maturity. This is the path of Christ.

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[338] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.23. Aquinas teaches that charity is the form of all the virtues, shaping both how we know and how we act. Based on this premise, attentive discernment replaces suspicion with sagacity, because charity purifies perception, enabling believers to interpret others not through the lens of fear but through the wisdom that seeks their good. Compassionate engagement likewise transforms conflict into communion, for charity moves the will toward reconciliation rather than retaliation, healing the fractures that rigid judgment often deepens. Ecumenical generosity reflects the expansive love of God who gathers rather than scatters, embodying the divine desire to draw all people into unity. In each case, Aquinas's vision of charity reveals that authentic Christian maturity is measured not by defensive certainty but by the capacity to love in a way that restores, reconciles, and re-creates communion.

[339] Coercion and capitulation stand as opposite distortions of genuine agency and relational integrity, each undermining the possibility of truthful encounter in its own way. Coercion seeks to overpower the other, imposing one's will through pressure or domination and thereby erasing the freedom that makes authentic relationship possible. At the other end, capitulation collapses one's own agency, yielding without discernment or conviction and thus abandoning the mutuality that healthy engagement requires. One destroys relationship through force while the other through surrender. Together they mark the two ends of a dysfunctional spectrum in which neither truth nor communion can flourish. The alternative lies in a posture that honors both freedom and responsibility, where persons meet one another without domination or collapse and where shared discernment becomes possible because *each retains* the dignity of a willing, truthful, and engaged self.

Postscript: Toward an Interdisciplinary Horizon of Healing

The preceding research has demonstrated that confessional rigidity between Roman Catholics and orthodox Protestants cannot be understood through theological analysis alone. The TAPS methodology reveals that the forces shaping confessional identity are profoundly interdisciplinary: theological convictions, anthropological patterns of belonging, psychological mechanisms of fear and trauma, and sociological structures of collective memory all converge to form the lived reality of division. The complexity of these dynamics suggests that ecumenical healing requires doctrinal clarity and more so a transformation of the *conceptual* (interpretive), *caring* (emotional), and *communal* frameworks through which believers encounter one another.

From a theological perspective, the Christian tradition has long affirmed that unity is a participation in the life of God and thus more than just some kind of institutional achievement. Augustine's insistence that rightly ordered love is the foundation of ecclesial communion underscores that unity is fundamentally a *matter of desire* before it is a *matter of definition*.[340] Anthropology helps to explain how ritual, symbol, and communal memory shape the imagination of believers in ways that often exceed conscious awareness. As Mary Douglas has shown, symbolic worlds can both sustain identity and reinforce boundaries that resist change.

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[340] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, X. To be clear, the wording of "a matter of desire before definition" is not a quote from Augustine or found in any of his writings. It is more of a scholarly paraphrase written by this researcher, not a verbatim Augustinian line. However, I believe it to capture the *logic* of Augustine's thought in Book X that rightly ordered love (desire) is the foundation of communion and the precondition for rightly grasping truth. Augustine does not subordinate doctrine to sentiment. He exposes the deeper anthropological truth that truth cannot be received rightly by a disordered will. For Augustine, love is the condition of theological clarity, not its competitor. When desire is misaligned (e.g., curved inward by fear, pride, or the need for control) doctrine becomes distorted into an instrument of self-protection, a pattern that mirrors the trauma-driven rigidity that this research paper analyzes. But when love is rightly ordered toward God and neighbor, the will is healed, the imagination is purified, and the mind becomes capable of perceiving and embracing truth without defensiveness. Thus, Augustine safeguards doctrine by insisting that only a heart shaped by charity can hold truth without weaponizing it. His insight complements this paper's argument, i.e., that spiritual maturity that is marked by secure attachment, humility, and interpretive charity is not a retreat from doctrinal seriousness but the very posture that makes genuine doctrinal discernment and ecclesial communion possible.

Psychologically, trauma theory clarifies why confessional hostility persists even when doctrinal misunderstandings have been resolved. Judith Herman's work demonstrates that trauma reorganizes the personality around fear, vigilance, and control, making vulnerability and ambiguity-both essential for ecumenical encounter-feel unsafe. Identity fusion further intensifies this dynamic by merging personal worth with group belonging, rendering disagreement existentially threatening, while sociologically collective narratives of persecution, decline, or chosenness shape the reflexes of communities across generations, reinforcing patterns of suspicion and withdrawal.

Patristic and medieval sources offer a counter-witness to these dynamics. We see how Gregory the Great warned that wounded leaders risk transmitting their wounds to the communities they serve unless they first submit themselves to healing. Cassian emphasized discernment as the "mother of virtues," a capacity that enables communities to distinguish between fear-driven rigidity and Spirit-led fidelity, while Thomas Aquinas taught that charity is the form of all virtue, binding the Church together through participation in divine love. These voices of wisdom from the ancient and scholastic past remind contemporary readers that the deepest obstacles to unity are not intellectual but spiritual and psychological.

The research presented in this paper contributes to a growing interdisciplinary recognition that ecumenism is far more than just a theological project, but at its core, a human one, simply because the healing of division requires the healing of the human heart. It requires communities to confront their wounds, relinquish the illusion of certainty, and cultivate the virtues that make communion possible: *contrition* (humility), *curiosity, compassion*, and *courage*. Therefore, the G.R.A.C.E. framework (grounded identity, receptive openness, attentive discernment, compassionate engagement, and ecumenical generosity) offers one way of articulating this transformation in a manner that is both theologically faithful and psychologically realistic.

As has been noted, the work of reconciliation is slow, often hidden, and rarely linear. Yet every act of interpretive charity, every refusal to caricature, every moment of genuine listening becomes a small participation in the reconciling work of Christ. To be clear, although the divisions of the past remain real, they need not determine the future. The Spirit continues to draw the Church toward the unity for which Christ prayed, inviting each generation to take one more step toward *grace* (freedom), *growth* (maturity), and *gathering* (communion). If the research ends here, the pilgrimage does not. The path ahead is long, but it is marked by grace.

Appendix A: Glossary of Theological Psychological Terms

Affect Regulation

The psychological capacity to manage emotional states in ways that support stability, flexibility, and relational connection. Impaired affect regulation often leads to rigidity, reactivity, and defensive theological postures.

See also: Emotional Brain; ARC; Spiritual Maturity; RIGID.

Agency

The ability to act intentionally, make choices, and shape one's environment. In confessional contexts, agency influences how individuals adopt, resist, or reinterpret doctrinal and communal expectations.

See also: Conscience Primacy; Identity Formation; Belongingness.

Anthropology

The study of human cultures, symbols, rituals, and social practices that shape how communities construct meaning and belonging. In confessional contexts, anthropology highlights how ritual, memory, and embodied practice form the cultural environment in which religious identity is lived and transmitted.

See also: Communal Memory; Cultural Memory; Boundary Maintenance; Sacramental Imagination.

ARC (Attachment, Regulation, Competency)

A trauma-informed developmental model describing how secure attachment, emotional regulation, and growing competency form the foundation for psychological resilience. In theological contexts, ARC illuminates how wounded attachment, dysregulated affect, and impaired relational skills shape confessional rigidity and defensive theological styles.

See also: Spiritual Maturity; Collective Trauma; RIGID; SAFE; GRACE.

Attachment Style

A psychological pattern formed in early relationships that shapes how individuals relate to others, manage fear, and seek security. Attachment style influences how believers approach God, community, and theological difference.

See also: ARC; Emotional Brain; Spiritual Maturity.

Authority Structure

The theological and sociological configuration through which a religious tradition organizes leadership, teaching, and communal decision-making. Authority structures shape how communities respond to conflict, dissent, and change.

See also: Boundary Maintenance; Confessional Identity; Doctrinal Rigidity.

Belongingness

The anthropological and psychological need to be embedded within a community that provides identity, meaning, and security. Belongingness often drives confessional loyalty more powerfully than doctrinal content.

See also: Confessional Identity; Collective Trauma; SAFE.

Boundary Maintenance

The sociological and psychological processes by which religious communities preserve identity, regulate membership, and protect perceived purity. When intensified by fear or trauma, boundary maintenance becomes rigid, exclusionary, and resistant to dialogue.

See also: Confessional Identity; Theological Fortressing; Ecumenical Anxiety; Fear Based Orthodoxy.

Certainty Seeking

A psychological strategy in which individuals pursue absolute and unambiguous answers to reduce anxiety, manage ambiguity, or stabilize identity. In religious settings, certainty seeking often appears as doctrinal fidelity while functioning primarily as emotional self-protection.

See also: Doctrinal Rigidity; Fear Based Orthodoxy; RIGID; Illusion of Certainty.

Cognitive Dissonance

The psychological discomfort that arises when beliefs, behaviors, or identities conflict. Individuals often resolve dissonance through rationalization, rigidity, or intensified group loyalty.

See also: Certainty Seeking; Projection; RIGID.

Cognitive Flexibility

The ability to shift perspectives, integrate new information, and adapt to complexity. Cognitive flexibility supports interpretive charity and spiritual maturity, while its absence contributes to

rigidity.

See also: Rational Brain; ARC; GRACE.

Collective Trauma

Shared historical wounds such as persecution, schism, or cultural marginalization that shape a community's memory, imagination, and defensive postures across generations. Collective trauma often produces heightened vigilance, suspicion of outsiders, and rigid confessional boundaries.
See also: Communal Memory; Projection; Boundary Maintenance; Ecumenical Anxiety.

Communal Horizon

The shared interpretive landscape formed by a community's history, symbols, rituals, and theological imagination. This horizon shapes what members perceive as plausible, meaningful, or threatening.

See also: Sacramental Imagination; Communal Memory; Confessional Identity.

Communal Memory

The shared narrative of a community's past, including its traumas, triumphs, saints, and struggles. Communal memory shapes present identity and future imagination. Memory can heal through honest integration or harm through selective idealization or grievance preservation.
See also: Collective Trauma; Communal Horizon; Theological Shadow.

Conscience Primacy

A Protestant-leaning psychological orientation that elevates the individual conscience as the primary locus of moral and theological authority. While capable of fostering authenticity and responsibility, it can also generate hyper-individualism or suspicion of communal discernment.
See also: Interpretive Charity; Doctrinal Rigidity; Identity Fusion.

Confessional Identity

The integrated sense of belonging, meaning, and self-understanding derived from one's religious tradition. Confessional identity is shaped by doctrine, ritual, memory, and community, and becomes rigid when threatened or fused with psychological survival needs.
See also: Boundary Maintenance; Identity Fusion; Theological Shadow; Collective Trauma.

Cultural Memory

The shared stories, rituals, and symbols through which a community preserves its identity across generations. Cultural memory shapes how traditions interpret trauma, conflict, and theological difference.
See also: Communal Memory; Sacramental Imagination; Symbolic World.

Doctrinal Rigidity
A defensive posture in which theological claims are held inflexibly, not primarily because of their intrinsic truth, but because they provide emotional stability, predictability, or identity protection. Rigidity often emerges under conditions of fear, trauma, or perceived threat.
See also: Certainty Seeking; Fear Based Orthodoxy; Theological Fortressing; RIGID.

Ecumenical Anxiety
The discomfort, fear, or suspicion that arises when encountering theological difference. Ecumenical anxiety reflects a fragile or threatened identity that interprets dialogue as danger rather than opportunity.
See also: Boundary Maintenance; Doctrinal Rigidity; Identity Fusion; Interpretive Charity.

Emotional Brain
A term used by Bessel van der Kolk to describe the subcortical and limbic regions of the nervous system that govern survival responses, affective reactions, and implicit memory. The emotional brain reacts rapidly to threat and prioritizes safety over reflection, which often produces rigidity, hypervigilance, and defensive theological postures when activated in religious contexts.
See also: Rational Brain; Collective Trauma; RIGID; SAFE; Fear Based Orthodoxy.

Embodiment
The anthropological and theological recognition that human identity, perception, and spirituality are shaped through bodily practices, rituals, and material environments. Embodiment grounds religious experience in lived, sensory reality.
See also: Sacramental Imagination; Ritual; Communal Horizon.

Fear Based Orthodoxy
A mode of belief in which doctrinal correctness is pursued or defended primarily out of fear. This includes fear of error, loss, contamination, or divine disapproval. Fear-based orthodoxy is

motivated by anxiety rather than love of truth or desire for communion.
See also: Certainty Seeking; Doctrinal Rigidity; Theological Fortressing; RIGID.

GRACE (Grounded Identity, Regulation, Attentiveness, Charity, Ecumenical Generosity)
A developmental trajectory describing the movement from fear-driven rigidity toward spiritually mature engagement. GRACE names the psychological and theological capacities that enable believers to hold truth with humility, curiosity, and relational openness.
See also: ARC; Spiritual Maturity; Interpretive Charity; SAFE.

Group Cohesion
The sociological strength of relational bonds within a community. High cohesion can foster solidarity and resilience, but under threat it can also intensify suspicion of outsiders and resistance to change.
See also: Boundary Maintenance; Identity Fusion; Ecumenical Anxiety.

Identity Formation
The developmental process through which individuals construct a sense of self through relationships, beliefs, memories, and communal narratives. Confessional identity is one expression of this broader process.
See also: Confessional Identity; Attachment Style; Collective Trauma.

Identity Fusion
A psychological phenomenon in which personal identity becomes tightly merged with group identity, making threats to the group feel like threats to the self. In confessional contexts, identity fusion intensifies defensiveness, absolutism, and hostility toward out groups.
See also: Confessional Identity; RIGID; Projection; Boundary Maintenance.

Imagination (Theological Imagination)
The interpretive faculty through which believers perceive, narrate, and inhabit the world of faith. Theological imagination shapes how doctrines are experienced, how Scripture is read, and how the self relates to God and community.
See also: Sacramental Imagination; Communal Horizon; Memory.

Interpretive Charity

A spiritual and relational posture that approaches theological difference with generosity, humility, and a willingness to understand before judging. Interpretive charity reflects secure identity and mature discernment.

See also: Spiritual Maturity; Ecumenical Anxiety; Conscience Primacy; GRACE.

Meaning Making

The psychological and theological process of interpreting experiences, events, and relationships in ways that create coherence and purpose. Meaning making shapes how believers understand suffering, conflict, and doctrinal difference.

See also: Rational Brain; Theological Imagination; Spiritual Maturity.

Mirror Effect

This term describes the dynamic in which opposing confessional traditions adopt parallel distortions, such that each community's extreme resembles the other's in form even while differing in content. In this pattern, Catholics and Protestants amplify the very traits they condemn in the other, revealing that defensive postures often arise from shared psychological mechanisms rather than unique theological flaws.

See also: Shadow projection; Confessional extremes; R.I.G.I.D.; S.A.F.E.; Identity fortressing.

Norm Enforcement

The sociological mechanisms through which communities maintain behavioral, doctrinal, and cultural expectations. Norm enforcement can stabilize identity but can also produce rigidity when driven by fear or threat.

See also: Boundary Maintenance; Theological Fortressing; Fear Based Orthodoxy.

Projection

A psychological defense mechanism in which individuals attribute their own fears, conflicts, or vulnerabilities to others. In confessional settings, projection often appears as attributing one's own anxieties or shadow elements to another tradition.

See also: Theological Shadow; Identity Fusion; Ecumenical Anxiety.

Psychology

The study of the internal emotional, cognitive, and relational processes that shape how individuals form identity, manage fear, and respond to threat. In confessional settings, psychology illuminates

mechanisms such as attachment, affect regulation, projection, and trauma that influence how beliefs are held and why difference may feel dangerous.
See also: Affect Regulation; Attachment Style; Projection; RIGID; Trauma

Rational Brain

Van der Kolk's term for the cortical and prefrontal regions responsible for reflection, interpretation, planning, and meaning making. The rational brain enables nuance, discernment, and flexible engagement, but it becomes less accessible when the emotional brain is activated by fear or trauma. In confessional settings, the rational brain supports interpretive charity, humility, and spiritually mature dialogue.
See also: Emotional Brain; Spiritual Maturity; GRACE; Regulation in ARC.

RIGID (Reactivity, Identity Fusion, Group Threat, Insecurity, Defensiveness)

A diagnostic schema describing the psychological mechanisms that generate confessional rigidity. RIGID highlights how fear, identity fragility, and perceived threat constrict cognitive and relational flexibility.
See also: SAFE; Doctrinal Rigidity; Fear Based Orthodoxy; Certainty Seeking.

Ritual

The patterned, symbolic actions through which communities embody belief, transmit memory, and reinforce belonging. Ritual stabilizes identity and reduces ambiguity, especially during periods of uncertainty.
See also: Sacramental Imagination; Communal Horizon; Cultural Memory.

Sacrament

A sacrament is a visible, tangible sign instituted within the Christian tradition through which God communicates grace, forms the believer in holiness, and incorporates individuals into the life of the Church. In sacramental theology, a sacrament unites an outward, material element (e.g., water, bread, wine, oil) with an inward, divine action, making God's presence and saving work accessible through embodied, communal, and liturgical means. Sacraments function as symbolic reminders and as participatory encounters in which divine grace is mediated through the Church's ritual life.
See also: Sacramental; Sacramental Imagination; Theology; Ritual; Symbolic World.

Sacramental

Sacramental refers to anything that participates in, reflects, or extends the logic of the sacraments by making divine grace perceptible through material, symbolic, or ritual forms. A sacramental reality does not confer grace in the same formal way as a sacrament but operates analogously: it reveals God's presence through created things, gestures, practices, or spaces that orient the believer toward holiness. In Catholic thought, the sacramental describes a worldview in which the material world becomes a conduit of divine meaning, shaping how believers perceive creation, worship, and communal life.

See also: Sacrament; Sacramental Imagination; Theology; Ritual; Symbolic World.

Sacramental Imagination

A Catholic-leaning orientation that perceives divine presence mediated through material, communal, and historical forms. This imagination shapes a spirituality of embodiment, continuity, and ecclesial belonging.

See also: Communal Horizon; Confessional Identity; Imagination.

SAFE (Stability, Answers, Familiarity, Expectation Control)

A motivational schema describing the psychological needs that drive individuals toward rigid or absolutized theological positions. SAFE clarifies why certain doctrines or practices become emotional anchors during periods of instability or threat.

See also: RIGID; Certainty Seeking; Fear Based Orthodoxy; ARC.

Shadow Projection

The process by which individuals or communities attribute their own disowned fears, conflicts, or unwanted traits to another group. In confessional settings, this occurs when Catholics or Protestants externalize internal anxieties by locating them in the opposing tradition, reinforcing defensiveness and rigid boundary-keeping.

See also: Projection; Group-threat response; Identity fortressing; R.I.G.I.D.; S.A.F.E.

Social Identity Theory

A psychological and sociological framework describing how individuals derive self-understanding from group membership. This theory explains why threats to a religious group are experienced as threats to the self.

See also: Identity Fusion; Confessional Identity; Group Cohesion.

Sociology

The study of social structures, group dynamics, and institutional patterns that regulate belonging, transmit norms, and maintain boundaries. In confessional life, sociology explains how communities reinforce identity through authority structures, collective memory, and practices of inclusion and exclusion.

See also: Authority Structure; Boundary Maintenance; Group-Threat Response; Confessional Identity.

Sola Scriptura

The Protestant principle asserting that Scripture is the supreme and final authority for faith and practice. It does not mean that tradition, reason, or ecclesial teaching have no value, but rather that all secondary authorities must remain accountable to the biblical witness. In its classical form, Sola Scriptura maintains that Scripture is sufficient in what it intends to teach for salvation and Christian living, and that the Church's role is to interpret, proclaim, and preserve this authoritative text rather than stand above it.

See also: Tradition; Theology; Conscience Primacy.

Spiritual Maturity

A developmental posture marked by secure attachment to God, humility, emotional regulation, interpretive charity, and the capacity to engage difference without fear. Spiritual maturity integrates theological conviction with psychological health.

See also: GRACE; ARC; Interpretive Charity; Confessional Identity.

Symbolic World

The network of meanings, images, narratives, and practices that shape how a community interprets reality. A symbolic world provides coherence but can become rigid when threatened.
See also: Communal Horizon; Sacramental Imagination; Cultural Memory.

TAPS (Theological, Anthropological, Psychological, Sociological Framework)

An interdisciplinary analytic structure that examines confessional identity through four integrated lenses. The theological lens explores doctrines, liturgies, and sacred narratives. The anthropological lens examines ritual, symbol, and cultural embodiment. The psychological lens analyzes fear, trauma, attachment, and identity formation. The sociological lens studies group dynamics, boundary maintenance, and institutional memory. Together, TAPS reveals how

confessional rigidity emerges from the interaction of belief, belonging, behavior, and the need for security.

See also: Confessional Identity; Collective Trauma; Boundary Maintenance; Spiritual Maturity.

Theological Fortressing

The use of doctrine as a defensive barrier rather than a pathway to truth or communion. Theological fortressing emerges when beliefs are weaponized to protect identity, manage anxiety, or exclude perceived threats.

See also: Doctrinal Rigidity; Boundary Maintenance; Fear Based Orthodoxy.

Theological Shadow

The unacknowledged or disowned aspects of a tradition's identity, including traits it represses, denies, or projects onto others. Theological shadow work involves recognizing how one's own tradition contains the very tendencies it criticizes in others.

See also: Projection; Confessional Identity; Memory.

Theology

The disciplined reflection on God, revelation, doctrine, and the meaning of faith as articulated within a religious tradition. In confessional contexts, theology provides the explicit content of belief while also shaping the narratives, symbols, and frameworks through which communities understand themselves and interpret difference.

See also: Doctrinal Rigidity; Sacramental Imagination; Theological Shadow; Spiritual Maturity.

Tradition

Referring to the living transmission of faith, practice, and communal memory across generations. It encompasses the Church's inherited patterns of worship, interpretation, doctrine, and moral life, not as static artifacts but as a dynamic continuity through which the community remembers, embodies, and hands on its identity. Tradition functions as a stabilizing framework that shapes how believers understand Scripture, participate in ritual, and locate themselves within a historical and communal story.

See also: Tradition (Catholic); Sacraments; Sola Scriptura; Theology; Imagination (Theological).

Tradition (Catholic)

Refers to the living and authoritative transmission of the faith as it is handed on through the Church's worship, teaching, and communal life across history. It encompasses the Church's doctrinal development, liturgical practices, sacramental life, spiritual disciplines, and the interpretive wisdom of the saints and magisterium. In Catholic theology, Tradition is not a static archive but a dynamic, Spirit-guided continuity through which the Church receives, preserves, and faithfully interprets divine revelation. It functions as a communal memory that shapes identity, safeguards doctrinal coherence, and situates Scripture within the broader ecclesial context that gave rise to it.

See also: Tradition; Sacraments; Sola Scriptura; Theology; Imagination (Theological).

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About the Author

Kenneth J. Howell, Th.D., is an independent researcher whose work integrates theology, philosophy, ethics and other related schools of thought to illuminate the deeper forces shaping religious identity and conflict. His research doctorate in theology and ethics examined the interrelation of theological reasoning, metaphysical frameworks, moral analysis, and historical method, culminating in his dissertation *Reality, Rationalism, and Reason*, a systematic study of Jesus the Christ through classical theism, philosophical anthropology, and doctrinal interpretation.

In this current study on confessional rigidity within Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, Howell applies an interdisciplinary TAPS methodology to explore how trauma, psychological

survival strategies, and collective memory shape defensive theological postures. His work develops original analytical tools including the R.I.G.I.D. and S.A.F.E. schemas and the Fear → Fixation → Ferocity trajectory to clarify how fear, insecurity, and identity-threat responses distort confessional imagination. Through this theological-psychological synthesis, Howell advances a vision of spiritual maturity grounded in humility, secure attachment to God, interpretive charity, and ecumenical openness, aiming to foster healing and a more integrated Christian communion.

His various research papers have been accepted and published in the curated collections of *Christian Theology and Biblical Studies; The Journal of Verbum et Ratio; Sciences, Ethics, and Religions/Ethical Journal of Research; Religious Studies;* and *Jungian Psychology.*